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Tips for Distributing Team Leadership

1. It's useful to distinguish between managing and leading. Managers hold formal authority (and accountability!). However, it is followers who hold the power in the leader-follower situation. Someone with no followers is not a leader.

You are sure to have many people who act 'outside the lines', making a positive contribution through informal influence. Can you make more of this?

2. As subordinates, people generally have little choice other than to follow a manager. However, great managers also exercise leadership, getting people to choose to follow them, rather than feeling compelled to do so.

If you are the formally appointed manager, think about whether your people are responding as compliant subordinates or enthusiastic followers. You'll enhance the chances of the latter if you actually facilitate and encourage distributed team leadership.

3. If you are wanting to gain a promotion, you don't need to wait for a formal appointment to showcase your abilities. Instead, show your leadership capabilities. It's arguably far more challenging to influence people when you don't have the formal authority.

4. People may exercise leadership without being 'the dominant leader', so are often over-looked. Keep a look-out for people exercising leadership and acknowledge those efforts appropriately.

ARE YOU LEVERAGING DISTRIBUTED TEAM LEADERSHIP?

Power from the informal organisation

There's no disputing that formal organisational authority is important. For the most part it is exercised as 'management' and we find it represented by the organisational chart. Ideally, formal organisational structure is designed in a way that supports strategy.

But, focussing on the formal 'chain of command' may cause organisations to under-value the important benefits of the informal organisation. This 'organisation-within- the-organisation' is ultimately how things get done. Instead of representing it with an organisational chart, we use a map of relevant connections.

New studies spotlight value in distributing leadership

Team guru, Jon Katzenbach, highlights the power of informal organisational channels in his 2010 book, "leading outside the lines". He and co-author Kahn see 'managing' as formal, labelling the informal energising of others as 'mobilising'. Mobilising occurs without the use of formal authority, and the term leadership immediately springs to mind as a more than adequate synonym.

MIT Professor Thomas Malone examines a different but closely related perspective in his new book, "The Future of Work". Malone stresses that in the knowledge economy, competent decentralised decision-making will provide significant competitive advantage. It's about capable people acting on their own assessment of a situation rather than waiting, maybe until it's too late, for direction from above. This too is a much less formal kind of power.

UGM's distributing team leadership survey

UGM has been researching perceptions of distributing leadership in teams, and there seems to be little doubt that people believe it is viable. We asked respondents to answer True or False to six questions relating to team leadership. The questions relating to distributing leadership are presented below. Most people felt the statements were True.

Q1: Usually, more than one person in a team actively influences what happens in the team.

93% answered True, and 7% False.

It is important, and helpful, to think of leadership as different from management. Managers are appointed to their roles. Leadership, on the other hand, can only occur when others choose to follow. In most teams, in their everyday context, different people exercise influence over team task and team processes. They do this when others choose to follow them and, when this happens, they are exercising leadership. Teams at all levels can have multiple individuals who exercise leadership, often varying according to the context or situation.

Q2: Influencing in teams can be pretty subtle at times.

93% felt this was True, 7% thought it False.

Influencing is not always best achieved through a chest-pounding, 'listen to me, I'm leader' approach. Many times it's a lot more subtle, and this can sometimes result in us overlooking when others' actually exercise influence or take the lead.

Q3: Getting the job done is more important than who is in charge.

81% called it True, 19% believed it False

Who is in charge is certainly important, particularly if you're the appointed person who is accountable. However, you'd probably agree that getting the job done is a lot more important than having people know who is in charge. If the job is getting done correctly, does it matter who is in charge?

Q4: Expertise usually plays a role in determining who members choose to follow.

The biggest variation here: 57% True, 43% False

Managers may be accountable for an outcome but they may not always know exactly what to do. Really good managers know where to find good people who have the right capabilities. Interestingly though, when it comes to leading and following, people usually choose to follow those who have the expertise needed in the moment. Remember, this doesn't change who is accountable - that's usually fair and squarely a managerial responsibility.

Q5: Leadership can be shared, even if not equally.

93% chose True, 7% chose False

A very commonly held belief (myth) says that we can only have one leader in a team. However, if we agree that leading is 'influencing others towards a common goal', then we know that many (most) people in teams exercise some influence. True, they don't all influence in the same way, or as frequently. However, when others are influencing then they're also sharing the leadership.

Q6: Team members sometimes choose to follow members who are not the appointed leader.

89% felt this was True, 11% called it False

This happens all the time, but often people are not aware of it. Also, we tend to look out for who leads the most and then call them 'the leader'. Truth is though, while they may be the dominant leader, they're not the only person exercising leadership. What a relief, as the role can be shared. Different people can lead in their areas of strength.

How can you use these insights to leverage distributed leadership? Our side bar suggests ideas.