



16 April 2010

Maximising Team Contributions

How do you think about team roles and team contribution? The questions below will provide some prompts.

Leading

1. What's my definition of leadership? Do I live that, or do I believe one thing but behave in other ways? An honest appraisal from followers is the only way you can know for sure.
2. How do I initiate action? Does this take into account others' contributions? Is this impacting effectiveness?
3. How do I take charge? Is my approach conducive to others playing their roles?
4. What is my own perspective of followers and followership? Are followers just sheep to be led or members fulfilling a valued team role?

Following

1. What is my personal definition of following and followership?
2. How often do I step into a following role, and how well do I generally perform?
3. What are the best contributions I've made in a following role?
4. What helps me be most effective when I occupy a following role?
5. What influence do I have as a follower, and how do I tend to use it?

ARE WE MAXIMISING TEAM CONTRIBUTIONS?

Working in teams

The weekly Senior Leadership Team meeting was drawing to a close. COO Alan Ford listened intently as company CEO Paul Green restated what he was expecting from the Apollo Project by next Monday. Alan responded, "No problem at all. We've got our next meeting in 10 minutes, and I'm expecting that we wrap Apollo by Friday, latest." Alan was certain he could deliver on his undertakings to Paul and the SLT.

Thirty minutes later, Alan was seated at the head of the same table. Around him sat the other members on the Apollo Project. The Apollo team was two weeks old, formed to design the bid for a takeover.

Had both meetings been videotaped, Alan's behaviour in the Apollo meeting would have looked very much like Paul's leading in the SLT meeting. In the SLT meeting, Alan had adopted more of a following role.

Leading and following roles are both vital

There is nothing remarkable in the vignette about Paul, Alan and the two team meetings. In fact, readily switching between leading and following roles occurs so often that we don't even think about it. To function, *all* teams need both leaders and followers.

Research also suggests that we are likely to spend much more time in a following role than in a leading role. In the formal SLT context, Paul is the leader and Alan is one of Paul's followers. On Apollo, Alan is the formal leader and the Apollo team follow him.

Following - sometimes the ugly 'f-word' in teams

Despite the fact that we are likely to fulfil both of the primary team roles of leading and following, the term follower is all-too-often the ugly 'f-word' of team behaviour.

Implicitly we know that nothing is possible without followers. Furthermore, someone who has no followers is, by definition, not a leader! So why do some leaders see the term follower as pejorative?

A key reason is because a leader-centric approach has dominated formal leadership research over the past century. For good reason too, because for thousands of years 'hero-leadership' (think king, chieftan, general) is how things have been run. Consequently, very few studies have been done on followers and following. With few exceptions (e.g. work by Robert Kelley and Ira Chaleff), we haven't given much formal attention to studying followers.

Taking a contributions perspective of team roles

Performance is a vital focus for most organisations. From an organisational perspective, it seems

appropriate to think about the value of the team roles of leading and following in terms of their contribution to team performance.

Contributions of the leading role

The leading role is primarily concerned with contributing influence around to team-oriented processes - to make (and keep) things happening. Teams rely on two leader contributions in particular.

Firstly, there is *initiating*. To make any progress, teams need to act. If no actions were initiated then nothing at all would happen. Thus leaders try and influence teams to take action.

Secondly, leading involves '*taking charge*'. There would be little benefit to being in a team if everyone just did their own thing, acting as individuals. Teams need one or more members to take charge of actions, helping to ensure that they are executed effectively.

[Our December 2009 newsletter examined the eight influencing behaviours leaders use to initiate or take charge of action.]

Contributions of the following role

The key contribution of the following role is carrying out and completing the required actions. This is where teams will spend most time. After all, it's essentially why we have teams. For this reason, many who initiate or take charge also roll up their sleeves and pitch in to help complete the team's work. This contribution in a following role hugely impacts subsequent influence in the leading role.

In the following role, members are not concerned with influencing team-oriented processes. However, this doesn't mean that followers have no influence. On the contrary, followers wield enormous, often unrecognised, power. They choose whether and who to follow. They choose whether or not they'll keep working on a task. Followers also often need to make judgements about how exactly they will complete an action when something unexpected crops up.

Maximising contributions to enhance performance

Successful team performance requires a variety of complementary contributions from among the team. Each of these contributions is, by itself, necessary but not sufficient for success. The team needs *all* of these contributions to achieve a successful outcome.

In a leading role, members initiate action and take charge. They focus on team-oriented processes. In a following role, members contribute directly to completing the task at hand.

How does your organisation generally value each role? More importantly, perhaps, how do you? Would your followers agree with your assessment? □