

The Art of Leadership – To Influence Willingness

By T. Yuvarajah



Leadership is the art of influencing people to get things done, willingly. This is the definition I learned, serving as an officer in the military. I used to wonder, then “How do I get soldiers to follow me in sacrificing their lives for a worthy cause?”. Yes, they would do it for the country, but would they follow me in doing so? After 22 years of soldiering in the military and 4 years down the private sector, I have come to realize that the art of leadership is the same, everywhere.

What is Leadership?

When does one become a leader? Whether you like it or not, the moment they place a person under your charge, you become a leader. It would mean that you are entrusted to lead the way for your subordinate worker in the accomplishment of a mission, task or job. This is where most managers fail to appreciate – the need to lead not to manage. Most managers do not recognize that they are responsible and accountable not just for the end result, but for the people as well. They are more focusing on the results, instead of attending to the performance and ability of the workers. As a result, managers are often seen fire-fighting and shifting, blaming either workers, HR, the system, culture and a host of other problems, except their own leadership style or approach.

The art of leadership competency, as I vividly recall from, is nothing more than the application of 3 fundamental characteristics:

1. Knowledge

Knowledge is all the required information in order to do a job or task. This may include technical, managerial, leadership, psychological and others. This is important to demonstrate, convince and influence your people that you know exactly what you want them to do. One should never be shy of knowledge or rank or status. The virtue of humility has a far reaching impact in the build up of trust. Knowledge is the intellectual dimension that allows a leader to build positive power of influence. People would listen in because of wisdom, not because they have to!

2. Courage

Courage can be measured in terms of physical and moral. Whilst physical courage has its significance in the military, it is moral courage that separates the professional from the amateur. A leader without moral courage is one without a backbone. Moral courage is the foundation for integrity because it gives you the strength of character within never to fear to anyone or anything in leading your people. This is what will inspire people to do, willingly, even the negative kind such as the world had witnessed in Nazi Germany during WW2. In a corporate context, this would mean standing up for righteousness, standing by your people, fighting for any injustice, rewarding them accordingly, and punishing them for their wrong doings, including termination. A leader must, when the situation demands, choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong.

3. Compassion

This is the emotional dimension that underscores the caring nature of a leader towards his fellow workers, particularly when the chips are down. It is a reflection of the degree of willingness to listen with your mind and heart. Compassion is not about treating people with “welfare” outlook, but rather treating people with respect, trust and care they deserve as human beings. If they have weaknesses or not performing up to expectations, then it is incumbent upon leadership to extend a helping hand in overcoming it effectively and efficiently. A leader who is willing to bridge the gap, listen to and empathize with his workers will earn their respect and sacrifice – paving the way to the ultimate test of all leadership – Willingness.

That in a nutshell is what leadership is all about, be you from any walk of life. Wherever you are or go, as long as you are a leader you shall be measured by these characteristics. Leadership is not about management, power authority, position or wondrous charm – It’s about inspiring and influencing people to do things, willingly.

Mr. T. Yuvarajah served in Armed Forces for 22 years, before switching to the private sector. A "hands on" person, his span of experience included Armoured Operations, R&D, Logistics, Trg. & Dev., Doctrine Review, HRM, Administration, and TQM implementation. The military "University of Hard Knocks" fostered the curiosity and passion in him to learn more of management and leadership skills in understanding about people and what makes them tick? His persistency brought him in contact with numerous learning outcomes, eventually gaining Diploma in Military Studies (AF Staff College), Diploma in HRM (MIPM), Diploma in Strategic and Defense (MU) and MBA (Newport).