



Managers & Leaders: Understanding a multifaceted continuum

By Maree McKeown, leadership consultant

A manager worries about getting the job done. A leader considers how the job could be done better and by whom.

It is imperative for organisations to understand the relevance of the 'Manager versus Leader' paradigm if they are to maximise talent and optimise engagement and retention. It is important to note that good managers do not necessarily need to be nor desire to become great leaders. This distinction is one of the key points to enabling all people on the manager-leader spectrum to recognise their strengths and work productively at accommodating weaknesses and making strategic career decisions. It also helps HR recognise natural tendencies towards both ends of the spectrum when hiring, promoting and coaching staff to best compliment and diversify talent across the organisation.

Distinguishing between management and leadership skills ensures employees at every level are suited to their role and aligned with company expectations. In order for people to function effectively it is important they know what is expected of them in output, attitude and behaviour. An organisation in control of its culture is an organisation that effectively communicates and manages these three key areas. Cultural management relies on highly skilled people managers working to bring out the best in themselves and their people in the context of a company parameters. The ability for talented managers to pull together cohesive teams relies heavily on strong, united leadership from the top.

A competent leader is as equally concerned with culture as they are with team performance. A great leader understands the need to entrust and enable their people to do things for themselves, including making mistakes. A competent manager may be too busy getting things done at ground level to even think about such big-picture items as maximising employee engagement and how best to develop a cohesive team of diverse individuals while maximising business growth and profitability.

The leader-manager distinction is further clouded by leaders and managers performing poorly. Just because an individual is in a management or leadership position does not automatically make them a good role model. Very few people are automatically good at managing, let alone at leading. Thus, if individuals are to be groomed to manage and lead well they must understand the distinction to ensure they are being true to their own strengths and limitations and also to raise their awareness in order to enhance gaps in their skill set. Too many individuals are promoted because of success in their technical role with complete disregard for their ability to manage people and lead the organisation forward proactively and inclusively. The risk of losing such technically skilled individuals is deemed to



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be of greater concern than the damage caused by soft skill ineptitude. Organisations need to pay greater heed to studies consistently showing that many people leave a job because of their direct manager. The implication of this is that for the short-term achievement of keeping a technically astute employee organisations risk longer-term talent loss as good people go in search for a more enjoyable and supportive work environment.

*"...the average individual in a leadership or management position in Australia and New Zealand is security oriented, uses a combination of Passive/Defensive and Aggressive/Defensive behaviours to cope in the leadership role, with the emphasis on coping, not truly leading."*⁴

It is important for aspiring managers and leaders to be aware of what a 'text-book' manager and leader looks like and recognise in others such attributes and behaviours while also recognising poor management and leadership practice. In order to gain value from such observations it is important to be self aware, recognising the existence of key attributes and areas of growth required. An individual new to management may consider themselves to be good at managing themselves and their own tasks (usually a strong indicator in promotion), but may see room for growth in better managing others effectively and may not have a lot of energy or desire to take on a strong leadership role until they are more confident in managing the daily needs and expectations of their team and key stakeholders. An individual who has confidence in managing a small team with a strong focus on performance may feel ready to step back from working so closely with the team and begin to shift focus to succession planning, upward management and a broader level of influencing within the organisation. It's somewhat similar to shifting from being a politician's assistant to being the politician.

If managers are to cope better with current demands and become effective leaders more needs to be understood about the interrelatedness of the manager and leader. John Adair¹ describes a manager as an 'administrator,' someone who is responsible for delivering on rules and procedures set by an organisation. A leader, on the other hand, plays a more innovative and bigger-picture role, at times challenging rules and procedures in pursuit of bringing alive their vision for how a business can be run more successfully and more meaningfully. Adair attributes much of the confusion between management and leadership to the fact that both roles exist on an overlapping spectrum:

*"...you don't stop being a manager at a certain stage and become a leader...leadership is an abstraction, a kind of mental periodic table for arranging in clusters all the elements we see in leaders in various fields."*¹



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It is valuable for employees wishing to advance up the career ladder to distinguish between three main criteria to successful promotion:

- 1) technical capability (ie knowledge and skill set): attention to detail in field of expertise and excellence in execution
- 2) management capability: Primary focus on the day-to-day running of a particular area of the business. Skilled at delegating tasks effectively and fairly; efficient in recognising and managing individual diversity as well as disciplined self-management. Competent managers share leadership skills of highly tuned interpersonal communication, conflict resolution and change management underpinned by advanced emotional intelligence².
- 3) leadership skills: the ability and drive to see beyond daily business needs, talented at innovating business and people solutions and highly collaborative and inclusive.

Leadership or management is not a single label to be obtained, but rather one of degrees. Just because someone functions well as a leader at a certain level does not mean they will necessarily have the same impact at a higher level. This also applies for managers. And just because someone is a good manager does not mean they will automatically be a great leader. An organisation needs to be clear on what attributes will best suit a role and begin to groom individuals to ensure they are aware of expectations beyond a single project.

“Managers cannot be considered to “lead” (i.e. to guide or direct) unless they in some way transform, shape or influence the organisational context of members and the ways in which they approach their work and interact with one another. The effectiveness of a leader, therefore, depends on the magnitude and direction of – as well as the strategies used to achieve – this impact.”³

While the leader-manager distinction is rather arbitrary at times the following provides a personal checklist for managers and leaders to enhance their capabilities. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but a good starting point for those confused by what is expected of them as a manager and leader:

Pre-manager Skills

Self management – task completion, time management, organisational skills

Ability to work effectively in a team – communication, respect and patience

Social-emotional awareness and control – ability to recognise and work with own strengths and weaknesses and those of others

Open to acknowledgement as well as constructive criticism



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Manager Skills

Pre-management skills

Ability to manage needs of team and all stakeholders

Responsible for ensuring direct reports are working on all aspects of pre-management skills

Astute in providing feedback appropriately and in a timely fashion

Leader Skills

As for manager

Ability to delegate greater responsibility and trust and support managers to be more autonomous

Higher level of care and responsibility for all teams across the organisation

More visionary input into business discussions

More involved in decision-making at a high level

Big-picture approach to thinking about their role and the business in general

Remember: The importance is in the doing, not in the distinguishing. The distinction only has relevance in isolating areas for development and soul-searching as to an individual's potential to step up to a role.

¹ *The Inspirational Leader: How to motivate, encourage and achieve success* John Adair, 2006, Kogan Page Ltd

² *Social Intelligence: the new science of human relationships* Daniel Goleman, 2006, Hutchinson

³ Quote by Robert A. Cooke. *Transforming Leadership and Culture: the state of the nations* Shaun McCarthy, 2007, Human Synergistics

⁴ *Transforming Leadership and Culture: the state of the nations* Shaun McCarthy, 2007, Human Synergistics