What Leaders Do?

Idea In Short

Leadership is not defined by a fixed set of characteristics. While many authors emphasize traits like fairness, integrity, and honesty, history shows that effective leaders don't always embody these qualities. Instead, leadership is best understood through actions.

Leadership is a complex concept. And, Leadership is not an exact science. While many theories attempt to define the essential traits of a leader, such as fairness, integrity, and inspiration, history offers counterexamples. Such figures as Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi and John F. Kennedy, despite lacking certain conventionally desirable qualities, commanded significant followings. Similarly, Claudius, the Roman Emperor, achieved notable success despite not being considered inspiring. This suggests that focusing solely on personal traits may not fully capture the essence of leadership According to the various versions of Traits Theory, humans are emotionally frail to consistently have all of the traits demanded of a leader. Instead, a more practical approach is to examine what effective leaders do.

Creation: Ideas and Environments

Leaders are fundamentally creators. They generate both a compelling idea and the environment necessary for that idea to thrive. This dual creation is what distinguishes true leaders. Many individuals in leadership positions generate ideas, and many create stable working environments. However, only a few successfully integrate both. The idea and the environment must work in synergy.

For example, setting a goal to reduce lost time injury frequency by 50% in two years without fostering a safety-conscious environment is destined for failure. A supportive environment requires encouraging the reporting of unsafe acts and incidents, with swift action from supervisors and managers. This has significant implications for budgeting, risk management , and organizational influence. Leaders also consider resource constraints when shaping the

environment. For instance, offering open-ended earnings based on sales results is impractical with a fixed sales labor budget.

In summary, leaders not only generate ideas but also cultivate the necessary conditions for their realization. This involves aligning the idea with a supportive environment and considering the organization's resources.

Articulation: Communicating the Vision

Effective leaders are skilled communicators. They articulate their ideas clearly and concisely, ensuring their subordinates understand the vision. This articulation encompasses the idea itself, the overarching goal, the steps required to achieve it, and the organizational style needed.

Some leaders wield personal power, allowing them to communicate through direct orders. Others rely on a broader range of tools. Leaders effectively employ facts, emotions, and symbols to achieve their communication goals: understanding, agreement, engagement, and action. They distinguish fact from opinion and speculation, fostering consistency and building trust. They often highlight the consequences of inaction to motivate change. Crucially, they prioritize in-person communication whenever possible.

In short, leaders communicate their vision effectively, using a combination of facts, emotions, and symbols to ensure understanding, agreement, and action.

Demonstration: Leading by Example

Leaders embody the organizational style they desire. This may or may not involve a formal declaration of values. Actions speak louder than words. If leaders expect long hours, they must demonstrate that commitment themselves. Similarly, a "safety first" culture requires leaders to be vigilant about unsafe acts and conditions. A high-accountability environment demands that leaders admit their mistakes and hold everyone accountable, regardless of personal relationships. Fostering innovation requires shifting from measuring processes to measuring results. Leaders also prioritize activities by integrating them into their organizational design.

In essence, leaders demonstrate the desired organizational culture through their own

behavior, setting the standard for others to follow.

Allowance: Empowering Subordinates

Leaders grant departments, functions, and individuals the appropriate level of autonomy to operate within the defined framework. This framework includes the idea, the goal, resource constraints, and the desired organizational style.

Delegating budget-setting authority to individuals lacking the necessary skills is counterproductive. Similarly, empowering decision-making without providing access to relevant information is detrimental. However, when individuals possess the competence and data, leaders grant them the authority to make decisions independently.

In summary, leaders empower subordinates by granting them appropriate autonomy within the established organizational framework.

Control: Balancing Freedom and Guidance

Accountability and control are two sides of the same coin. Organizational controls significantly influence behavior, complementing the leader's articulation and demonstration.

Leaders establish and revise controls based on the idea, the goal, the steps to achieve it, and the desired organizational style. Controls can take many forms, including power derived from position, expertise, or personal appeal. In larger organizations, written processes with performance targets are essential. These processes range from detailed work instructions to high-level process flows. Performance is measured at each level, with leaders identifying key performance indicators [KPIs] relevant to the goal and organizational style. They measure both leading and lagging indicators. Leaders combine KPIs with process audits to assess performance and use problem-solving skills to address performance gaps. They avoid confusing KPIs with goals, targets, or objectives and ensure that KPIs are relevant, measurable, and credible. Finally, they establish consequences for individuals who consistently fail to meet KPI thresholds.

In short, leaders establish and manage controls to guide the organization toward its goals while maintaining appropriate accountability.

Summary

While leadership traits vary, effective leaders consistently perform certain actions. They create and articulate ideas with clear goals, demonstrate desired behaviors, grant appropriate freedoms, and maintain control through meaningful measures. These actions, whether formal or informal, guide organizations toward their objectives and define true leadership.