

Leadership in Group Process

Jane M. Downey, M.Ed.

What is a Leader?

If you are a leader someone is following you in some way. Therefore, when we talk about leaders we must also delve into the tricky topic of groups or the people who follow.

We all want to be leaders these days, or so we think, because our popular culture tells us that is our preference. The word leader implies possession of a degree of power, a measure of autonomy and creativity or freedom.

This discussion of leadership will address the following Leadership Skills:

1. **Visioning and Clarity of Focus**
2. **Matching project priorities to Vision**
3. **Emotional Intelligence**
4. **Communication Skills**
5. **Managing Risk and Fear**
6. **Strength to make Decisions**
7. **Motivational and Coaching Skills**
8. **Team Management Skills including Facilitation**
9. **Matching Leadership Styles with Team Styles**
10. **Ability to Enable Team Processes**

“Authentic leaders have absorbed the fundamental fact of existence--that you can't get around life's inherent contradictions. The leadership mind is spacious. It has ample room for the ambiguities of the world, for conflicting feelings and for feelings and contradictory ideas...I believe the central leadership attribute is the ability to manage polarity.”

--Peter Kostenbaum as quoted in *Fast Company*, March 2000.

1. Visioning and Clarity of Focus

A good leader has a clear picture of future results and aligns organizational strategy with this vision. A leader must be intimately familiar with the end destination—something that Stephen Covey refers to as “Keep the End in

Mind”. Without a roadmap, a concept of the future, or a belief in new opportunities, the energy for momentum and growth will not only be lost, but it will be dissipated on activities that do not generate the desired organizational outcome. It is a leader’s responsibility to set a vision, and then keep the vision in focus at the same time often holding disparate events together.

Visioning is a process that should be done on a *macro* level and then fine-tuned into smaller goals and objectives for each group and organizational activity. Individuals, as leaders, should develop their own personal mission and vision and work diligently to make sure that their goals match intrinsically with those of the organization they serve. There is great power in harnessing a view of the future and turning it into reality.

2. Matching project priorities to Vision

Understanding that many projects, desired outcomes and resources are in competition within the organization, an effective leader will keep the vision in sight and use it as the litmus test for making and establishing priorities. If an organization is well aware of the activities targeted for the most support, internal conflict is reduced because priorities have been established through clear guidelines. This creation of clear structure is an essential element of managing groups. It also allows the leader to delegate authority and responsibility through effective communication of the overarching organizational goals.

3. Emotional Intelligence and The Fight-Flight Response

Daniel Goleman introduced the concept of *Emotional Intelligence* in his best selling book. An effective leader understands him/herself and has a great degree of understanding of human behavior. On an internal level this translates into the ability to communicate clearly, to regulate internal responses to a perceived threat, and to maintain strength and focus in a crisis. In short, a emotionally intelligent leader is knowledgeable about the fight/flight response and makes sure his rational and cognitive brain functions are engaged before he acts or responds.

Here are the specific aspects of the fight/flight response:

- Something happens that makes you uncomfortable (It can be as small as a past memory)
- You perceive that you are under attack (You may not even be conscious of this)
- Your brain signals the release of ACTH
- Your adrenals release cortisol
- Cortisol increases the release of amino acids including homocysteine from the skeletal muscle and fatty acids from adipose tissue.
- These amino acids are absorbed by the liver and converted to glucose, which are subsequently secreted into the blood to be used for energy by certain tissues such as brain cells and red blood cells.
- The fatty acids released from the adipose tissue are used for energy by skeletal muscle, thus sparing the available glucose for use by the brain.
- Insulin levels rise
- Your heart rate elevates and your blood vessels constrict
- Digestion shuts down and blood flow is diverted
- Your breathing becomes shallow to take in more oxygen for a physical response

This physiological response sounds great if you need to make a run for it. If you don't engage in physical action, you will have an abundance of insulin, glucose, fatty acids and neuropeptides generated in your body with no immediate physical release. This can greatly contribute to disease over the long term, if you sustain these levels due to repeated stresses.

Now let's examine what happens to your "mind" when you perceive an attack. That is, when your mind believes you are under threat, your body physically responds to this threat by strengthening certain survival mechanisms which can include: increased heart rate, dry mouth, shallow breathing, and the ability to concentrate only on the threat. This is created by a surge of adrenaline so that you can fight the threat.

It is our *perception* that triggers this response to both imagined and real dangers. This physical response does not assist you unless the fear is real. (In fact it very often makes your mind go blank. Have you ever had your mind go blank during a public presentation or some other perceived stress? Why does this happen?)

The Amygdala: Stress reactor

It is noteworthy that these stressful events are stored in an entirely different area of the brain, known as the amygdala: our bodies are specially programmed to remember events that are perceived to threaten our survival. Thus amygdala arousals have a memory imprint that is stronger than normal recollections. When the brain perceives such an event, the conscious mind is

bypassed and the amygdala instructs the body to prepare for a fight. This means that, in effect, the brain has **two memory systems**; one for ordinary facts and one for emotionally charged ones. When threatened, we want to bypass the cognitive mind so we can react quickly.

We only need our current reality to mirror a small part of an old trauma, and the crisis response is triggered. The more traumas you have experienced, the easier to trigger a fight/flight response. When this response is activated we are operating from a more primitive part of our brain. Who knows what your original trauma may be. It could be embarrassment at show and tell in the first grade or fear taught by our parents.

Whether it is a present day event or a memory, is now irrelevant. This amygdala arousal creates difficulty when there is no threat. In the case of arousal there is no use or release for this increased physical capacity and we must learn to “turn off” the mechanism through relaxation techniques.

How do you stop your fight/flight stress response? Here are some ideas:

Stop:

- Pause before you respond when under stress
- Breathe deeply and calmly
- Stretch gently
- Take a Break: empty your mind so no stress is present

Relax:

- Listen to soft, soothing music
- Find a soothing environ
- Sing your favorite song
- Drink soothing herbal teas

Know yourself:

- Talk with a friend, counselor, or loved one
- Recognize and study your stress triggers
- Practice your stressful situations so you “unlearn” your fear
- Gather more information about your situation to dispel fear

4. Communication Skills

An effective leader needs an incredible amount of information to chart a course for his/her organization. Many failures in decision-making are easily tracked back to the failure of a leader to solicit the proper information, or the failure of a group to accept information that may be difficult (bad news). The process when a group makes a "bad" decision even though all of the necessary facts and critical data are held by the group is known as "**Group Think**". (This is exactly what happened when NASA made the decision for the last launch of the Space Shuttle Challenger. An engineer from Morton Thiokol had the information that the freezing temperatures would put too much pressure on the O-rings *and* the predicted launch temperature was much less than the O-ring's specifications. Because of immense peer pressure, his only protest was to say, "It is not on the right side of goodness" and the launch took place.)

An effective leader will listen to information that is difficult to hear and will remain open to new possibilities. This creates circumstances ripe for innovation. Facilitation skills also enable a good leader to bring forth processes that allow groups to avoid the pitfalls of "group think," primarily by allowing contributions to be made without criticism. Additionally, leaders who are attuned to innovation will generally permit—and even celebrate—minor failures incurred on the road to innovation.

Very often in business we have to discuss issues with our team members or other departments on which we may not agree. The best conflict resolution results from discussing the issues, listening to the other party and providing constructive feedback. Unfortunately, many of us have been trained to criticize or provide judgment prematurely, rather than hearing multiple alternative viewpoints.

Active Listening

Active listening means getting involved in your conversations. It means asking questions that will encourage the other person to "engage".

The necessary components of effective listening include:

- Adopting a manner that is harmonious with the other person in terms of pacing, volume and tone of voice.
- Adjusting your body postures so the other person feels comfortable
- Maintaining intermittent eye contact
- Paraphrasing what the other person has said, or how they are feeling
- Praising or complimenting them if it feels natural

- Repeating points of your conversation that surprise you
- Asking questions
- Clarifying vocabulary or jargon you do not understand
- Making sure you speak for yourself and not the other person.
- Talking about what you have observed, think or perhaps fear.
- Using short clear statements to break messages into small parts

These subtle cues can go a long way toward reassuring people that they are being heard, as well as allowing the listener to retain the maximum amount of information.

5. Managing Risk and Fear

A leader understands that fear is a natural and healthy reaction and at the same time, does not allow fear to stop a new idea or direction. A leader engages in *risk management*, the study of the potential risk outcomes of an activity or venture and makes calculated risks based on the information available. It may be scary that the actual outcome is unknown, but a leader works as hard as possible to control that outcome through resources, group motivation and positive thinking. Change and transformation within organizations are natural processes, and a great leader begins to embrace the unknown and to consider the thought of staying in exactly the same place the frightening outcome.

Fear is a gift. Effective leaders know how to tap into what is known as real fear, and not one based on an old outdated emotional response from the past. Leaders tap into intuition that may be able to provide guidance on the “right” decision. Only through recognition of the difference between anxiety and a true gut reaction can this internal wisdom be accessed. Fear is not overridden; it is overcome through research, and the emotional intelligence of self-understanding.

According to Larry Wilson, in *Play to Win*, there are four fatal fears that can cripple a leader:

- Fear of Failure
- Fear of being Wrong
- Fear of Rejection
- Fear of Discomfort

An effective leader analyzes these emotional responses and with great regard sorts through the real facts of a new situation to make healthy and intelligent choices for the team.

Interestingly, studies cited in *See Jane Win* and *The Rise of the Creative Class* have shown that individuals who can handle rejection are often the ones more likely to generate creative ideas and be willing to take risks. Surprisingly, a pattern emerges: many of the leaders who are unfazed by criticism share a common childhood experience, that of being an 'outsider,' or not fitting in. Interestingly, therefore, being "one of the gang" does not necessarily create the effective leader in today's fast moving economy. Controlling change is perhaps the overall key to leadership success, and responding favorably to unfavorable peer reactions is a critical supporting factor.

6. Strength to make Decisions

This attribute embodies the *strength* to overcome the fear of failure and the *wisdom* to isolate real threats versus perceived risks. It is extremely difficult to make a choice that others may not support. Of course, a great leader will generally have much overall support, but there are times when difficult choices must be made. The effective leader will know that the quicker a change is made, the better it will be for the organization. Living in uncertainty or confusion that is created through indecision is very damaging to employee morale and to the overall direction of an organization.

Team revolt

In the process of team evolution it frequently happens that a leader that develops a strong, self-directed team will experience a period of time in which the group *revolts* against the leader. This is highly predictable behavior; because the effective leader understands this process and can remain comfortable in peer-pressure situations, he/she will resist the urge to stifle this healthy, creative outburst and allow the group to find its way towards a greater stage of maturity.

Decision-making Preferences

A leader will also carefully analyze the decision-making techniques to be used. In some cases, the leader may receive contributing information and make a stand alone or unilateral decision. In other cases, the group may be asked to make a decision based on majority vote or in another on consensus. The most important aspect of decision-making is *engendering and creating the support for your decision* even if it is a choice not "liked" by everyone. Group process

studies show that if the decision is not thoroughly discussed, the leader can foolishly believe a decision is supported because people did not speak out (sometimes, in fact, the work is being sabotaged on a quiet level). An effective leader will allow group members to dissent to avoid this destructive process.

7. Motivational and Coaching Skills

As a leader, you must be able to motivate others to follow and to take your lead. How can you create a motivating environment?

- Develop open and honest communications
- Let your employees know that “bad” news is welcome so that information flows
- Demonstrate a willingness to support others
- Generate a spirit of cooperation

People are motivated by a supportive, acknowledging environment in which they feel appreciated and that their contributions are important. Money and compensation are always important, but we know that most employees leave jobs for more challenge, more opportunity or an open creative climate.

Power Motivations

People are also motivated by power. Where do you as a leader find your power?

Reward Power: The ability to give or to take away

Coercive Power: The ability to punish

Legitimate Power: The ability to enact

Referent Power: The ability to be identified with and liked

Expert Power: The ability to influence with knowledge

It is important to recognize that self-directed teams will be grown and nurtured through reward, knowledge and support. Using coercive power in a decision-making environment can keep critical information hidden and demoralize a group. An effective leader will work as a coach, encouraging and highlighting the positive aspects of performance, recognizing strengths and continually highlighting the overall goal.

There are times that constructive feedback or criticism must be given to generate better performance. A good leader will not allow substandard work

to be accepted. If feedback of a correctional nature is to be given, here are some guidelines below.

Constructive Feedback should be:

- Descriptive
- Specific
- Focused on Behaviors
- Directed towards behavior that can be changed
- Considerate to both parties
- Interactive
- Well timed
- Given infrequently
- Well organized and insightful

8. Team Management Skills--including Facilitation

Group skills are learned and must be practiced. We are not born with them; depending on background, a leader may have been poorly educated on how to work in groups. For example, a very strict and authoritarian schooling system (one that does not allow for group interaction) trains individuals to seek direction and to avoid using self-directed processes. Additionally, many schools of thought emphasize the “getting the work done” aspect of teams without teaching the need to develop communication channels and openness to diversity.

Excellence in Process and Task

Successful teams require excellence in two key areas. The first, which you practice every day, is what are called **Task** items, or simply, getting your work done. The second key is known as the relationship or **Process** component of teams. This involves information processing, communication and decision-making skills.

The questions a group should ask is what are the **Results** of the group:

1. Were goals achieved?
2. Is the “customer” satisfied? Every group must be infinitely clear on its definition of who is the customer.

Results are achieved by focusing on **Tasks**:

1. Did the group work?
2. Were group roles clear?

3. Were the group's efforts coordinated or was it simply a mix of individual efforts?

This output will be significantly affected by the **Process** and relationship components of the team:

1. Did members feel supported?
2. Was trust established?
3. Did all members participate?

9. Matching Leadership Styles with Team Styles

Teams, grow and evolve like humans. They have an early infancy stage, a toddler stage that can drive a leader crazy, an adolescent stage where the group needs to be supported but likes to think they are "all grown up" and finally they reach the adult stage where they can handle most challenges and tasks with little direction.

The four stages of team development are:

Norming: Dependency and Inclusion **Leadership Style: Directive**

In the early stages of a group, anxiety will be high without a designated leader. The development of a communication structure is critical. The group members are extremely polite and courteous when they first meet. The members with perceived power will be given more attention, credibility and group time. Members who are shy will often remain silent.

Storming: Counter-dependency & Fighting **Leadership Style: Coaching**

In this stage it is key to expect conflict and hostility. The successful resolution of this conflict enables the team to move into greater productivity and continue to develop self-grown norms. This is how the group develops shared values and experiences. Individuals with hidden views will begin to contribute and share their thoughts. Additionally there will be a shift in perception concerning the leader. A great leader should prepare for a mutiny in stage two. As the group struggles to define its communication style, it will often project anger on to the leader or if that is not comfortable, one member of the group.

Forming: Trust and Structure **Leadership Style: Supporting**

In this third stage, trust and cohesion are emphasized as the group structure is adjusted to improved goal achievement. This stage anticipates a higher level of negotiation concerning roles, processes, and communication structure. The

Very often, a novice leader will assume that a group is already at stage 4/Performing and delegation can begin. Teams need to grow through the other three stages particularly to develop trust and structure so that they become self-directional.

10. Ability to Enable Team Processes

An effective leader will fully understand the difference between a short-lived *working group* focused on completing a directed task versus a *team* that will be supported and allowed to mature to a self-directed entity with its own culture, internal leadership and output. Additionally, the effective leader will choose the leadership style appropriate to the stage of development of the group.

A high-functioning team will have the following processes in place:

- An agreed-upon Mission that is refined into team goals
- Regular interaction
- Codes of conduct
- System of accountability
- Measurement of progress
- Resources both structural and informational
- Team processing
- Celebration and acknowledgement of achievements

The leader will determine if the team or group has generated these processes internally or if external influence is needed to round out the support necessary for success.