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Leadership means taking the initiative and doing something to make a difference

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Columnist

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Question: After reading a dozen books on leadership, I'm still not sure what it is. What exactly is leadership?

Answer: Everyone knows leadership when they see it, but there's no general agreement as to what it is.

The literature on leadership focuses on aspects of leading, such as decision-making or team building. As a result, leadership gets reduced to a question of style, process or technique.

Most people do not see themselves as leaders. Their perception is that leadership is defined as a position of authority in an organization. What they read about leadership doesn't fit in with their personal or work life.

Most leadership literature is written for managers and entrepreneurs, giving the impression that leadership is just what people in positions of authority do.

This means that our understanding of leadership is too narrow. As a result, people who rightly should be considered leaders are resistant to that label.

Leadership is any action that a person takes to make a difference.

Whether that person is the chief executive of a global corporation or a line worker in a manufacturing plant, the decisions they make and the actions they take have a significant impact upon the success of the company.

The moment of leadership is a decision by a person to take the initiative and make a difference. That difference is change.

The change can be a problem solved, a contribution made or a relationship made better.

Each person in an organization has the potential to function in a leadership capacity. They can become leaders through the work they do each day.

From this perspective, leadership is a product of the character of the person. It's not simply a management technique.

Imagine what it would be like if each person in your company had the self-confidence to act for the betterment of the company. Imagine a company where individual leadership is nurtured.

A company of leaders is one where there is a deeply shared commitment to the company, a high level of communication and a well-functioning operating structure. It is born in the individual initiative of each person.

There is a twofold challenge for senior leaders in fostering an environment of shared leadership. First, as the competition for talent intensifies, developing leadership at all levels needs to be a key strategic initiative. Second, as the company's capacity for leadership grows, the character of senior leadership becomes a strategic advantage to be realized.

Leadership is the impact of character in action. It is shared by all.

Leadership, therefore, happens at the moment when individual initiative acts to make a difference for the better.

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