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New model of leadership demands initiative from the individual

By Ed Brenegar
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Question: What do readers really think about leadership in their companies? Is it positive or negative? Do they care?

Answer: I recently received this response from a reader: "Leadership to me has absolutely nothing to do with a company. Most companies do not have leaders.

They have people in positions of power — that is all."

This opinion characterizes an older, fading model of leadership that focuses on positions of power within an organizational structure. Only bosses are leaders, and everyone else is a follower.

There has been much written about "followership" as a form of leadership. In this older model, employees are compartmentalized into their own discrete positions within the company and are responsible for taking orders, doing their jobs and not creating problems. The role of compliant follower is a counterpart to that of a boss who exerts power by micromanaging the company.

If this is the past, what is the future of leadership?

The changing structure of organizations is transforming the nature of leadership. The old vertical hierarchies are giving way to organizational structures that look more like high-performing basketball teams. The best teams require all players to contribute from their strengths in a coordinated fashion. The point guard, the strong forward and the center each have a specific role. There may be a superstar on the team, but he or she can no longer win the game alone. Teams win championships; superstars win celebrity endorsements. The future of business organizations lies in their ability to form teams of leaders who take leadership initiative based on their individual strengths and within their roles on the team.

The old model of teamwork is to attend the meeting, do your job and stay in your place. The emerging model of leadership requires each person to take initiative to make a difference. Or, as the reader quoted above said, "Leadership is not 'any action that a person takes to make a difference,' but any action that a person takes 'to make a difference for the better.'"

The old model of business leadership was about the concentration of power in the hands of a few people at the top of the organizational chart. The new model emphasizes the personal initiative of employees. They have greater latitude to act according to their own sense of what is in the best interests of the company and its customers.

By necessity, power is becoming more widely distributed throughout organizations. A CEO's leadership challenge is to motivate employees to act in a coordinated manner. It means building teams that communicate well and are committed to the goals of the business.

Today, businesses have to be agile, and agility is a leadership function. When employees are empowered to lead from their own initiative, companies are able to respond quickly to changes in the marketplace.

This is the opinion of Ed Brenegar. He is president of the Community of Leadership, a leadership development and transition-planning consultancy. He writes the Leading Questions blog at <http://edbrenegar.typepad.com>.

Send your leadership questions to him at ed@edbrenegar.com.

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