

Is Anyone Following the Leader? Incoming executives should recognise certain preconditions

By Charlie Lang, Executive Coach, Trainer and Founder of Progress-U Limited



Is Anyone Following the Leader?

Do you remember being able to distinguish the really good teachers from the ordinary ones when you were still in school? I remember noticing a particular difference. When good teachers left the room during a class, most of the students kept working. When the not-so-great teachers stepped outside, everyone immediately started talking. Clearly, some teachers were able to "lead" their classes more effectively.

This also holds true in the workplace. Most employees can detect an ineffective manager and don't give their best for such a person. If they have a good leader, though, the boss doesn't even need to be present for them to be fully effective.

What does an effective leader do differently? There are three interrelated preconditions which must be fulfilled in order to influence any group (Figure 1): the leader must be willing to lead, have permission to lead, and be capable of leading.

We often assume that someone promoted to a senior position is willing to lead. In most cases, though, promotions are given as recognition of good performance in a previous role and are accepted because they confer higher status, better pay and more authority.

But it is important to realise that willingness to lead is not automatic. Some executives don't want to assume a leadership position for reasons of self-doubt or because they are reluctant to accept the additional responsibility and workload. In the first case, targeted development can help; in the second, it is better to accept the decision and keep the employee motivated with other challenges.

Earn respect

Permission to lead relates not to the employer's formal confirmation of a new role, but to the respect shown by team members towards a leader and their willingness to follow directives. This largely depends on gaining the respect of the group's key opinion makers. Many people mistakenly believe that once they are given authority, others will automatically respect them, but this is not guaranteed.

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I still remember the case of Peter, a newly appointed department head who had built a sales team from scratch for his previous employer. His credentials appeared excellent since he had a good track record and leadership experience. What people had not realised was that building a new team is completely different from taking over an established department. When you have employed people, they usually give you credit and respect straightaway because they are grateful for the job.

It's different when a manager takes over an existing team. Respect must be earned and there will always be some suspicions about a new boss. Very quickly, the group determines whether respect is merited or not. The informal opinion leaders will decide and others will adopt a similar viewpoint. After a couple of months, Peter's team was close to mutiny; they rarely cooperated with him, and the only way he could achieve anything was by giving strict instructions. This approach only undermined morale even more.

Peter could have avoided this situation by realising that if you want respect, you must first give it. You have to show you deserve it and you must set the right boundaries. He thought his title automatically entitled him to respect. This belief led to an arrogant attitude, which meant he made a bad first impression. A more humble attitude would have allowed his co-workers to find him more approachable and to respect him as a person.

Setting boundaries

In terms of deserving respect, many incoming managers assume they know best. However, people can only become truly competent when they have knowledge and experience in a specific role. It simply damages a manager's reputation to pretend competence in areas which are really unfamiliar. Setting the right boundaries ensures that authority is not undermined. However, executives should remember that while boundaries exist to establish authority and respect, they must be reasonable and designed to create a good working relationship between the group and its leader.

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Assuming that there is a willingness to lead and permission from the group to do so, things still won't work unless there is also clear evidence of the ability to lead well. Don't believe in the myth of the "born leader". The necessary skills can be learned and must be developed like any other competency. To excel, one needs to learn the techniques and supporting traits such as communicating like a leader, coaching others, establishing effective feedback, acting with integrity, and encouraging employee participation.

First-class leaders are aware of these preconditions. Developing the right competencies helps in getting permission to lead and increases self-confidence. This then results in a greater willingness to lead. As a result, it is possible to get closer to the ideal stated by Dwight Eisenhower that "Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it."

With the friendly permission of Career Times who published this article on September 16, 2005

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Charlie Lang works with senior executives who are already successful and want to make sure that they stay at the leading edge. They are often challenged by issues like:

- How to improve staff retention, especially how to keep top performers.
- How to achieve a corporate success culture that guarantees longterm success.
- How to create new levels of excellence through high employee engagement.

Charlie, an executive coach & trainer who is known for his innovative approaches towards leadership, change processes and sales, assists his clients in mastering these challenges. They achieve outstanding results through Charlie's unique application of latest findings in research combined with his own experience in international management and leadership.

Charlie's mission is to help Progress-U's clients deal with their interpersonal challenges in the most effective way for the benefit of all stakeholders. To achieve this, Charlie offers Executive Training and Coaching to middle and upper management. He also delivers public speeches, and is a passionate thinker and writer of articles on these topics. End of 2004 he started authoring "The Groupness Factor", a book on First-Class Leadership which was published in August 2005.

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