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## BEING A LEADER IN LEADERLESS CULTURE

There is a new “leaderless” culture. The old ideas about leaders are changing. This is partly due to the demographic shift and partly due to changes in work practices.

A “leaderless” culture is one in which there is a resistance to traditional models of leadership. People like to think that they can run themselves. This is an individualistic, self-managed society. It is not a matter of this being a “better” or “worse” society; it is simply a different one.

There are broadly three “generations” of workers in western developed countries. First, there are the workers born before 1945. These are the “Depression” generation because the most important formative event in their life was the Great Depression. They are used to working in large organizations and have sought a “job for life”. They value loyalty and hierarchy and like traditional leadership styles. They are used to – if not expect – close supervision and the ability to refer problems upwards. They may have difficulty coping with the new era of flexibility and short-term contracts.

Second, there are the “Boomers”, born between 1946 and 1966. They did not know the economic and wartime hardships of the earlier generation. They rebelled against the formality of that generation when they reached their teenage years. They were the first teenagers in history with spare cash and they created the youth market. Previous generations may have lusted after “sex, drugs and rock and roll” – but this was the first generation that had the money and time for them. They took their rebellious nature into the workplace and so workplaces became more informal. If a person wanted to be a “leader” then he – or she – had to earn it. Respect was not guaranteed – it had to be earned.

But in middle age, they now have their own problems. They grew up in a golden era of economic growth. But that is now turning sour. Many have failed marriages, little contact with their children and somehow life has not turned out quite as well as they expected. There is a sense of cynicism and jadedness.

Third, since 1967 have come “Generation X”. These have travelled over the drawbridge created by the Boomers and gone out of the institutions. They have little interest in the values of the Depression or even Boomer Generations. They are used to fast-paced, short-term activities.

They can cope with the short-term nature of many jobs. They are signed up for tasks, complete the tasks and then move on. They can live with the fluidity of work practices in a way that the “jobs for life” Depression and Boomer generations cannot. They are reconciled to the prospect of down-sized organizations, with flattened structures and fewer opportunities for promotion.

They have little time for “institutions” of any sort: long-term loyalty in businesses, membership of non-governmental organizations (such as churches and service clubs), mortgages or even marriage.

In this new individualistic “leaderless culture”, there is little interest in formal leadership. First, there is a cynicism about leaders in all organizations. People will listen to what someone has to say if what is being said appeals to them. They want to know what is in it for them. But leaders cannot automatically expect respect.

Second, age is no guarantee of wisdom in an era of great change. We are all strangers in a strange land. The getting of wisdom is worthwhile only if it is relevant. But so many of today’s events seem unprecedented and so an older person is not automatically a better guide than a younger one. Indeed, the fast pace of modern life may require high levels of energy and these could be lacking in older CEOs. Thus, in business and politics there is a trend towards younger leaders.

But of course people still do need to be organized. There is still a need for leaders, but the “leaderless” culture requires new approaches towards leadership. The traditional ideas no longer work so well.

Here are five recommendations. First, recognize that this is – for better or worse - a new era and that new approaches are required. This is not just a passing phase, after which somehow everyone will come to their senses and we can revert back to the old style of traditional leadership. Those days have gone.

Second, the new style of leader is that of facilitator: encouraging people to see what is required, getting them the resources to do the job and then leaving them alone to do it.

Third, a leader has to be a visionary: to see that which is currently invisible. Such a leader may look at an empty field and “see” a shopping centre or factory. The leader has to be able to help others to also “see” that vision.



0 Fourth, a leader therefore has to be able to communicate a clear vision and leave it to others to complete the task. Generation X will do the job; they just want to be left alone to do it. They do not want close supervision.

Finally, there is a need for leaders to read widely, to keep up with the broad trends, and to be a generalist. They need to know enough to ask intelligent questions, to have an intuitive feeling for things may be wrong, and they need to have the self-confidence to suggest alternative lines of thought.

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