

The Leadership Ladder

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In the late 1980's, a West Virginia physician named John J. Cannell startled many people with the announcement of his discovery that every state in the country had reported that their students scored above average on standardized tests. He referred to this discovery as the "Lake Wobegon effect," after Garrison Keillor's mythical community where "the men are good-looking, the women are strong, and all the children are above average."

While we know that it's not statistically possible for everyone to be above average, it is a theme that permeates every aspect of business today, even leadership. Most people in business today view themselves as advanced leaders. They justify that view by pointing to key factors such as numerous years of experience leading people, a fancy high-ranking title, or advanced degrees. In reality, advanced leadership is best defined, not by the leaders but by the followers.

It's generally accepted among "leadership experts" that there are five levels of leadership to which one can aspire. And although the titles of the levels may change from expert to expert, the descriptions remain fairly constant. It's important that these levels not be confused with the levels on an organizational chart, or equated with years of experience as a leader. Instead, these are levels that you can achieve only by asserting the influence of your leadership on those around you. As you read through the levels below, remember that there is one thing that all leaders require to be effective – followers.

"If you think you are leading and no one is following, you are really only taking a walk." – John Maxwell

Levels Of Leadership

1. Positional – The first level of leadership is the Positional Leader. This person is the leader only because they have the title on the organizational chart. Their power is derived from their title and their ability to exert organizational authority. They can hire and fire. For that reason people "follow" them, doing what they are told, when they are told.

2. Permission – As you move up the leadership ladder and start to build trust people give you permission to lead them. They begin to follow you because they WANT to not because they HAVE to. "Permission" based leadership is much more powerful than "Positional" leadership because people will exert themselves more and assist you in reaching your goals. This is where leadership starts to be more fun.

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3. Results-based – When you reach this level of leadership people follow you because of what you have done for the organization. It implies that you have been in your position for a while and those around you are aware of your success. They understand that by following you, they can be successful as well.

4. Loyalty-based – This level of leadership results from a strong commitment to developing your people and helping them achieve higher levels themselves. People will follow you because of what you have done for them. This is a level that few leaders ever really reach.

5. Honored – The highest level of leadership is reserved for those people who are larger than life. People follow you, without knowing you out of respect for who you are and what you represent. At this level, your reputation for leadership skills and abilities precede you.

In the rest of this article we will examine each level of leadership in more detail. Taking the time to understand the different levels of leadership will not only help you understand your own leadership better, but it will also help you develop the leaders around you. And that is the ultimate goal of any great leader.

Positional Leadership

The first level on the Leadership Ladder is that of the Positional Leader. It's the most easily recognizable position because it comes with a title (Manager, Director, Vice President, even CEO) but it is actually the least powerful of the leadership levels, regardless of the fancy title.

In any discussion of leadership, it's important to remember that where the leaders fall on the leadership ladder is not defined by the leader themselves, but by the followers. It is the followers who decide how fast and how far they will follow the leader. Followers look to the leader to provide them hope, a vision for the future, and confidence that the leader will put the needs of the team members ahead of the leaders personal needs.

If you think you are leading and no one is following, you are only out taking a walk. – John Maxwell

The definition of a Positional Leader is a person in a leadership position, installed into that position by someone in authority. In other words, this might be the “manager”, hired by the boss and placed in a leadership position on the organizational chart. Notice that the word “manager” is in quotes. That's because, it's not the title that makes this person a Positional Leader. It's the fact that their sole source of power is associated with their position on the organizational chart.

The Positional Leader is literally the lowest rung on the leadership ladder. Followers, if there are any, follow because they understand that this person has the authority to hire and fire, control budgets, and assign unpleasant tasks. In other words, people follow because they have to, not because they want to. There is no question that you have run into and probably worked for a number of Positional Leaders over the years.

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Newer Positional Leaders will wear their title like a badge of honor. The perceived power of their position is the source of great pride that can be flashed like a weapon at every opportunity. They will assume that they have the respect of those working for them, even though they have done nothing to earn it.

At this level of leadership, trust does not exist. It has either not yet had a chance to be nurtured, or trust has been violated. In a best-case scenario, the Positional Leader will have the opportunity to build trust in the organization and eventually advance his leadership strength. In a worst-case scenario the leader does not understand that the source of his power is in his title. They make no attempt to build trust with their subordinates and instead use their positional power to advance their own personal objectives. When this happens, the leader not only fails to advance, but may soon themselves in competition for actual leadership in the department.

As you may have guessed by now, Positional Leaders can be found at any level of an organization. They may not have the title of manager. Instead, their title could be "Sr. Manager", "Deputy Chief", "Director", "Vice President" or even "CEO".

The most interesting aspect of the Positional Leader is that it is a role that all leaders pass through in their careers. In fact, many excellent leaders pass through this role numerous times in their career. The most common way an established leader becomes a Positional Leader is when the leader takes a new job in a different part of their current company, or in an entirely new company. Since they are unknown to their new followers, the leadership ladder must be climbed again. The experienced leader, knowing how the ladder must be climbed, immediately begin building trust with their peers and subordinates and set out to prove that they deserve to be respected and followed for something other than just their titles.

Permission-Based Leaders

The second level on the Leadership Ladder is occupied by the Permission Based Leaders. In many ways, this is a very powerful leadership position. It's also the position that is most often overlooked, especially by Positional Leaders. A Permission Based Leader sometimes lacks the prestigious title of the Positional Leader, but they have one big thing the Positional Leader lacks - Followers. If you want to know who has the power to lead, it's time to learn more about Permission Based Leaders.

At the first level of leadership (Positional Leadership) you are in charge because someone higher up has said that you are in charge. Or, if you own the company, you are in charge because you have the money and the control. People will follow you because they have no real choice.

In Permission Based Leadership, people are following you because they want to follow you. And that is a HUGE difference. People who follow you because they want to, are more likely to go the extra mile for you, putting out that little extra effort that is required. When you are "chosen" to be the leader, people look up to you, respect you, trust you, and will try their best to make sure you succeed. With a Permission Based Leader, the followers understand that their success is tied to your success and vice-versa.

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True leadership is based on trust, and the affects of that are very noticeable at this level. At this level you are “elected” the leader by the followers. They have decided “who” they want to follow, and that “who” is you.

Why did they choose to follow you?

There could be any number of reasons. First and foremost, people follow someone that they trust and respect. Sometimes that trust is built on your technical skills. You perform your tasks better than anyone else, so they naturally turn to you for help, guidance, and leadership. But more often, that trust is built on the softer skills that you may not even pay much attention to. Things like your ability to listen and understand their challenges and issues, or your ability to communicate the needs of the organization. Regardless of the reason, the followers have decided that you are IT!!! You are the leader.

Where do you find Permission Based Leaders on the organizational chart?

They can be anywhere on the organizational chart. Hopefully, they are filling those top boxes, where they have been assigned from above, and accepted and embraced by those below. But that is not necessarily the case. In many instances the Permission Based Leaders are not identified by any special indicator at all on the organizational chart. They are listed among the other employees of the organization without any acknowledgement of their special place in the department. In fact, they often go unnoticed by the Positional Leader who fails to see who it is that the team is really following.

That failure to notice who the team is really following is a huge reason why so many Positional Leaders are replaced seemingly “out of nowhere”. When the Positional Leader and the Permission Based Leader are not the same person it’s a sure sign that the team lacks trust in the Positional Leader and has turned elsewhere for guidance. It is not an unusual occurrence for a team that is struggling to perform to turn away from the Positional Leader without the Positional Leader even noticing. Often the Positional Leader is replaced a short time later. It then becomes the first task of the new Positional Leader to discover who the Permission Based Leader is and to try and retake control of the organization from him/her.

As you can see, a Permission Based Leader outranks the Positional Leader in the hearts and minds of the followers. And in spite of the organizational chart, that’s the only place that really matters.

Results-Based Leaders

As we step up to the next rung on the Leadership Ladder, we encounter the Results Based Leader. Results Based Leaders are easily recognized by most of us because we can readily see their successes. These leaders generate a following based on their past successes and by our predictions of their future successes. For a lot of people, the Results Based Leader is the pinnacle of leadership and one that they aspire to themselves. And there is no question that results count.

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When you have achieved the level of “Results-based Leader” it’s because the people who are following you have already seen and/or experienced your leadership. Everyone wants to be part of a successful team, and the followers know that you will get results from past experience. They know that by following you, they too will be successful.

Leadership at this level has been earned through your past successes and triumphs. They now follow you eagerly, knowing what to expect from you because they have seen it with their own eyes. The belief in you exists, as does the trust that you have earned through prior engagements. This level of leadership is achieved much less often than you might believe. While many leaders look at themselves in the mirror and believe that they see success and results, their definition of success may not match that of their followers.

You see, followers have a much different view of success than you and your boss might have. Their definition of success is actually much broader and more stringent than you define for yourself. While you look at “the numbers” to measure your success, your followers expect the numbers plus a satisfying work environment where they can learn and grow. Failure to achieve both goals means that you have not truly achieved a Level 3 leadership role.

Sometimes new leaders, or new leaders to an organization (Positional Leaders) will try and immediately leap to this level by trying to convince the followers of their worthiness. This is often referred to as the “Trust Me” syndrome. As a leader, you are aware of your abilities and don’t want to have to wait to earn the respect of your new followers. You look your followers firmly in the eye and say, “Trust Me and I will take you where you want to go!”

Unfortunately, it doesn’t work that way and causes many leaders to overestimate their leadership level in an organization and therefore their ability to get results. While your followers may nod in agreement as you pronounce yourself a Level 3 Leader, they will not bestow this 3rd level of leadership until you have earned it with your actions. This is why many new leaders in an organization struggle initially. They believe that they have earned Level 3 (Results) Leadership, while the followers have only bestowed Level 1 (Positional) Leadership upon them.

Level 3 Leadership happens when your people trust in you to get the results THEY expect. Failure to recognize the higher standards imposed by the followers is the primary reason that many leaders fail to achieve real leadership. Achieving success as defined by your boss is fairly easy. Achieving success as defined by the people who will make or break your career (your followers) is much more difficult.

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Loyalty-Based Leaders

As we continue down the path in our study of leadership, we come to a personal favorite, Loyalty Based Leadership. Loyalty based leadership is a level that few leaders ever reach. Leaders who develop a loyal following do so because they have nurtured that loyalty day after day, month after month, year after year. They don't do it for themselves, instead this type of loyalty grows because of the leaders commitment to the people around them. When you achieve this level of leadership you have fully committed to your people, and they have fully committed to you.

We're actually not too fond of the name here, because we believe it focuses too much on the followers' desire to follow and not as much on what the leader has done to deserve this level of leadership. For a leader to actually achieve this level, they have to have set out to intentionally develop the people around them. It takes a conscious decision that most leaders never make, to ensure that the people reporting to them, grow and develop as leaders. In fact, the people below them may actually grow and develop to the point of surpassing the original leader. For those reasons, I actually prefer something more along the lines of "Developmental Leader".

When a person reaches this level of leadership they have not only learned, but ingrained the lesson that leadership is not about them, but about those around them. They understand and acknowledge their own limitations, and realize that to achieve greatness, they need greatness around them. They go out and hire people who are highly talented and highly ambitious. If they error in hiring, they are quick to acknowledge the mistake and rectify it before it impacts the entire organization.

They seek out and understand the strengths and weaknesses of their people and instinctively understand when a talent should be developed, versus a talent that is lacking and needs to be supplemented with other resources. Their expectations of those around them are high and they won't tolerate those who fail to live up to them. The followers of these leaders look to them not only for direction and vision, but also for the personal development that comes from working with someone who obviously cares about the future of their people and the organization and works hard to ensure that both are constantly growing. The rewards this leader seeks are not only for him or her self, but for all of those around as well.

It may be easy to read the above and decide that this leader is what is commonly referred to as a "people manager", who tries hard to "take care" of their people and shield them from perceived harm. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Those so called "people managers" shield their people like mother hens, never recognizing their weaknesses, nor letting them grow through experiences good and bad. The people manager sees the very best in each employee and fails to recognize how they could best develop. They surround themselves with mediocre performers, and try and convince themselves and others that the people are truly outstanding.

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Perhaps the best way to identify a “Loyalty Based” or “Developmental” leader from a “people manager” is to watch how problem employees are dealt with. The Developmental Leader wants to surround his or her self with the best and will take whatever steps necessary to ensure that those around them receive the required training and coaching, or are replaced with someone more capable. Meanwhile, the “people manager” glosses over problem people, failing to deal with personnel challenges. These “people managers” are more concerned with popularity or lack of dissent than they are with weeding out poor performers.

Many aspire to this level of leadership, but few attain it. Few have what it takes to surround themselves with the best and not worry about seeing themselves as the brightest star. But if you can achieve this level of leadership, your success is virtually guaranteed.

The Honored Leader

We’ve now reached the top of the Leadership Ladder. As we’ve learned in the previous pages, leadership levels are related not so much to the individual, but to the followers. It’s the followers who determine the ultimate level of achievement for the leader. One person’s “Loyalty Based Leader” can be another person’s “Positional Leader”. With the Honored Leader, it is slightly different. The Honored Leader is generally recognized by everyone for their role. That does not mean that everyone will follow the Honored Leader, but there is no denying their influence.

The rarest of all leaders is The Honored Leader. It’s a level of leadership reserved for those who are admired and followed because of both who they are and what they represent. In fact, it’s a level of leadership that those who seek it, never achieve. The only people who achieve the status of Honored Leader do so because they DON’T seek out the glory and status of a leader. Instead they seek to serve.

Examples of Honored Leaders would include Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi and even Benjamin Franklin. These are people that became leaders through the service of others and earned the title of honored leader, without ever pursuing such a grandiose titles.

These people are nearly universally admired for their works and gifts to society, even though they may have been scorned by some during their time. Certainly Martin Luther King Jr. is considered an Honored Leader by so many today, was hated by many during his lifetime. Yet his gifts to this country are undeniable, and were done not to elevate himself, but to elevate his people and the American society in general.

The same is true of Mahatma Gandhi who led the people of India in their quest for independence from the British. His power and leadership came from his willingness to give of himself and his belief in non- violence is legendary. Yet Gandhi, like Martin Luther King Jr. had numerous detractors and was assassinated for his beliefs.

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So as you can see, popularity and being an “Honored Leader” do not necessarily go hand in hand.

You may well think of other “great leaders” and wonder whether or not they belong on the list of “Honored Leaders”. Just remember that the true distinction between a great leader and an “Honored Leader” lies in the selfless service to others that lies at the heart of their desire to lead, and others desire to follow.

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