

# Leaders Let Go

*Leadership is a social act.*



by Howard M. Guttman

**W**HAT SHOULD BE A leader's relationship to followers? The leader as an omniscient decision maker is no longer a viable option. Most decision-making today occurs in teams. Effective leaders work with their teams to develop a range of decision-making options. For example: How will important decisions be made—unilaterally, collaboratively, or by consensus? Who will be consulted for information or opinions? Who will make the final decision? Who will execute it? And, when will the leader pass decision-making responsibility to team members?

## Four Leadership Behaviors

Astute leaders focus on the capabilities of their team and vary their decision-making behavior, depending on the skill level of each team member. They may be *directive* and tell people the what, where, when, and how. Or they may *coach*, de-emphasizing the "how" in favor of the "why." They may choose to be *collaborative*, and treat their senior team members as partners. Or they may choose to *delegate*, allowing team members to "run with the ball."

Each behavior has its advantages. Let's examine when and why a leader would opt for each behavior.

**1. Directing.** In hierarchies, directives come down from on high and are expected to be carried out—no questions asked. Today, leaders of high-performance teams are *primus inter pares*—first among equals. The ability to influence—to persuade others to change their point of view and behavior so they are aligned with yours—has become a critical skill. Today's leaders must command respect without *commanding*.

There are, however, times when a leader must be directive. For example, if there is a strategic dispute within the management team, the CEO is obliged to listen to all sides. But when push

comes to shove, he or she must make the tough choice. Or, when a person has changed functions, the leader may have to step in and shore up shallow knowledge or lack of experience.

Sometimes it is obvious that direction is required before the task can be carried out or the decision made. In other cases, the leader may need to test the person's capabilities by asking:

- What experience have you had?
- When you had a project similar to this, what steps did you take to get it rolling? How would get this project going?
- When you put together task forces, how did you decide who should be on the team? Who do you want on the team for this project?



- Where do you look for information? Where would you look for information on this project?
- When conflict came up on your team, how did you deal with it? How will you deal with conflict on this project?

The responses to such capability-testing questions tell the leader much about the person's ability to work independently and about the degree of direction needed. In such a context it's not whether or not a leader should let go, but when and to what degree.

**2. Coaching.** Before leaders can hold people accountable, they must ratchet up the level of competency. By coaching people, leaders help them develop the skills they need to operate effectively on their own. One effective coaching tool is

the use of "boomerang" questions. After the person answers one question, the leader turns that statement into another question, and so on. The objective is to get the person to look beneath the surface of the issue, to explore every avenue, before arriving at a decision. It's skill that enables a leader to let go with confidence.

One highly skilled manager at Motorola use boomerang questions to help one of his team members resolve an issue with a colleague in Europe.

**Leader:** "What are the next steps?"

**Member:** "I'll move ahead on my own."

**Leader:** "When you say you'll move ahead, what exactly do you mean?"

**Member:** "We'll write up the plan and start executing without him."

**Leader:** "What are the pros and cons of doing that?"

**Member:** "I'll get it done, but I'll alienate the folks in Europe."

**Leader:** "Do you have another option?"

**Member:** "I can tell the rest of the European team that we can't wait any longer. We've got to move ahead, so let's discuss it in a conference call."

**Leader:** "What are the pros and cons of this option?"

**Team Member:** "It will get them on board, but it will slow us down, and it may not resolve the issue."

**Leader:** "Do you have another option?"

**Team Member:** "Yes, we can engage in a conflict-resolution conversation. I'd say we need to escalate this to the team."

This manager refused to play Solomon when playing Socrates was in order. By using boomerang questioning, he encouraged his colleague to develop a solution himself. As it turned out, the issue between the two managers was resolved at the next team meeting.

Effective coaches refuse to be drawn into the "content trap." Once you become entangled in details, you can't resist giving advice and offering solutions, which defeats the purpose of coaching. Give people solutions and you enable them to resolve a specific issue; teach them how to arrive at solutions and you enable them to resolve future issues.

**3. Collaborating.** Many people are anxious about "trying their wings," even after coaching. An astute leader shifts his or her behavior by agreeing to collaborate. But, first the leader should clarify the reasons for involvement by asking:

- Why is it necessary for me to collaborate in the resolution of this issue?
- What is the value you bring to the resolution of this issue?
- What value do you see me bringing?
- What do you need or want from me to make this collaboration work?
- What can I expect from you?
- Who will have the final say?

While collaborating in a problem-solving or decision-making session, the leader can also coach to increase the skills and confidence of those involved.

**4. Delegating.** Delegating implies the highest level of trust. When a leader delegates, he or she hands over the reins in one area to one or more members of the team. They are on their own, fully accountable—and, hope-

fully, fully equipped—to take action.

Once again, the leader needs to ensure that those who will be held accountable for results are set up for success and not failure. Before empowering others, the leader needs to ask:

- Do they have all the information, or access to the information sources, that they will need to resolve this issue?
- Do they have the resources, such as headcount, budget, space, with which to carry out their assignment?
- Do they have all the tools they will need, including hardware, software, and printed materials?
- Have they forged, or have I forged for them, relationships with others whose help they may need during the project?

Delegation is efficient leadership behavior because it liberates the leader from many day-to-day, operational

concerns that divert attention from strategic issues. Delegation saves time by eliminating the need to go back to the leader for approval. It short-circuits conflict by removing the leader, and his or her preconceived notions, from the loop. It keeps decision-making close to the customer. And, it builds bench strength by creating new leaders who can take over when their turn comes.

Leaders must serve as role models for thoughtful decision-making, allow people to try their decision-making wings, reward successful decisions, and reinforce learning from poor ones. **LE**

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**ACTION:** Vary your decision-making behavior.