

The Five Leadership Roles

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It is one of the major disservices of the "super(hero)" school of leadership that it suggests a leader can command all situations with the same basic gifts.
--Garry Wills

Leadership is not "one-size-fits-all". Different situations require different roles, skills and behaviors. While all leadership involves a blend of conceptual, technical, and human relations skills, the right combination of these skills varies with the role demanded by the situation. For example, top executives tend to need more conceptual and human relations skills than technical skills. Their jobs require mental, analytical, and diagnostic abilities to acquire and interpret information from multiple sources in order to make complex decisions that affect the organization as a whole, and they must manage a complex array of relationships on an on-going basis. Technical skills, including job skills and functional expertise, are essential for first-level managers. Middle managers, who function as communication links between top and first-line management, must have strong human relations skills along with the conceptual and functional skills important for middle management decision making at the unit or division level.

These variations in skills are important to support the distinct responsibilities of the levels of management. However, regardless of your title, appropriate leadership behavior is also determined by the unique demands of your team, the strategy, market and organization at any given time. As a guide to help align your behavior with objectives, all leadership behavior can be grouped into five major roles:

The Technician:

Doer - does the core technical work. Demonstrates high degree of technical proficiency. Engages in troubleshooting, problem-solving, and fire fighting.

The Manager:

Controls the flow and accomplishment of work. Plans and organizes. Directs people to get things done. Maintains discipline, order and the status quo. Sets daily goals and priorities. Directs resources to accomplish work.

The Trailblazer:

Looks externally to the environment to anticipate trends and changes. Creates a vision of where the organization is going. Translates vision into objectives. Asks "what if..." and acts as catalyst for change. Encourages risk-taking and innovation.

The Architect:

Pays attention to the infrastructure and culture of the organization. Sees the relationship between parts and tries to improve systems, processes, methods and structure to sustain and improve the organization over the long-term. Aligns systems to strategy and vision.

The Coach:

Motivates, inspires and develops people. Maintains awareness of people and interpersonal dynamics. Effective communicator. Provides resources, training and information so people become empowered. Sets standards for performance and behavior. Acts as mentor.

All leaders perform all five roles, though most of us overuse one or two roles and neglect the rest. In traditional organizations, leaders on all organizational levels tend to emphasize the manager and technician roles. "Managers" and "Technicians" increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the status quo and promote stability. In high performing, innovative and growing organizations, leaders on all levels emphasize the architect, trailblazer and coach roles. "Architects", "trailblazers" and "coaches" create momentum, resourcefulness and commitment to new solutions when the old ways no longer yield desired results.

The key to effective leadership is finding the right balance between these roles. If there is not a good balance, the organization and performance will mirror that lopsidedness. Finding this balance requires that individual leaders and teams of leaders step out of their comfort zones and adapt to what the organization needs from them to accomplish its goals.

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Application:

1. What trends do you see in your organization relative to the use of the five leadership roles?
2. What is the impact of these trends?
2. What kinds of things do you do as a technician, manager, architect, trailblazer and coach?
3. How much of your time is spent in each of these roles?
4. How much of your time would ideally be spent in each of these roles to best meet the needs of your organization?
5. What will you do differently?

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