

Leadership in 2021

How Leaders At All Levels Can
Make 2021 A Great Year



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Introduction

As the year 2020 opened, it appeared to be a continuation of good economic times and great opportunities. That didn't last long. A global pandemic, civil unrest, and a general unhappiness took hold and seemed to be signaling changes that many feared might be permanent.

History will certainly record 2020 as one of the strangest years ever. For some, forces and circumstances beyond their control were devastating. For others quick changes and innovative approaches allowed them to avoid total loss.

As we move into 2021, there is hope in the air, even though there are still challenges for leaders at all levels. The embrace of fundamental leadership skills will be what makes the difference as companies move ahead. This paper looks at some of those skills and how they can be applied to make your company more successful in the new year.

Like everyone else, we want 2021 to be a little less tumultuous. In spite of what we may desire there will be some new crisis in your company's future. The best way to prepare is to develop good leaders who have a solid grasp on basic leadership skills and how to apply those skills in their own situation. We have specifically addressed leadership skills that will have a large impact on a team's or company's ability to weather whatever new storms occur.

This paper addresses basic skills, but those skills apply to leaders at all levels. We've also included a section on finding and developing the kind of leaders you will need in 2021 and beyond.

If you would like to speak to us directly about the skills in this paper, or about the leadership challenges you face, please contact us at Team@dleadershipgroup.com or call 505-453-5266.

There is nothing new

A search on Amazon.com for leadership books returns over 60,000 results. In order to sell those books authors will often present some facet of leadership as a new idea or a new concept. In many cases, that approach serves only to make age old truths more complex than they really are.

If you haven't read *Xenophon's Cyrus The Great: The Arts of Leadership and War*, edited by Larry Hedrick¹, you should. In the 6th century BC Cyrus combined the Medes and Persians to create the Persian Empire. His empire ultimately stretched from India to the Mediterranean Sea. About 100 years later, Greek historian Xenophon wrote the book about Cyrus. That book, which Hedrick has made very readable, presents a great synopsis of good leadership techniques. Cyrus led his empire 2500 years ago with the same leadership techniques that are effective today.

There is really nothing new in leadership. What often is new and often different is how leaders apply those skills. As Hersey and Blanchard taught many years ago, leadership techniques are most effective when they are applied in ways that fit each specific situation.² When leaders clearly understand leadership skills, they find it much easier to apply those skills appropriately in the many different situations that arise.

There is nothing new in fundamental leadership skills, but there are infinite possibilities in how leaders apply those skills. The leader who learns those skills and how to apply them in their own situation will enjoy the most success in 2021 and beyond.

Will the Real Leader Please Stand Up

It is vitally important for senior executives, business owners, and leaders at all levels of a company to understand who are real leaders. To understand that we must first lay a common misperception to rest – the constant discussion about the differences between management and leadership. So often we see “experts” present the misconception that someone is not really a leader but just a manager. What they really mean to say is the person in question is not a very good leader.

Who are the leaders in your company? Is there some magical point where someone suddenly transitions from a mere manager to a leader?

¹ Hedrick, Larry, editor. *Xenophon's Cyrus the Great: the Arts of Leadership and War*. St. Martin's Griffin, 2007.

² Hersey, Paul, and Kenneth H Blanchard. *Management of Organizational Behavior*. Prentice Hall, 1993.

No!

It's essential to understand that management is a function of leadership. All leaders have management responsibilities. Almost all managers have leadership responsibilities. Therefore, if a person is in a position that makes them responsible for the actions of others; if they are accountable for what the team does or doesn't do, they are by default a leader. Whether a person is a project manager, shop supervisor, and office manager, shift supervisor, or a plant manager, they are a leader.

Notice the words supervisor and manager. Those words will almost always denote a leadership position. Acknowledge their management responsibilities, but recognize them as leaders.

To understand where leaders are, it's helpful to understand what leadership is at its root. There are many definitions of leaders available but defining leadership does not have to be complex. In fact, at its basic level, it's quite simple. **Leadership is getting things done through people.**

Of course there are different levels of leadership responsibility, from leading a small team to running a large corporation, but all leaders are responsible for accomplishing something they will best achieve through the people on their team.

Management is a function of leadership. Anyone who is responsible for the actions of others is by default a leader. Therefore, the question is not whether they are a manager or a leader. The only question is, are they a good leader or do they need to learn leadership skills and how to adapt them to their situation.

The Three Foundations of Effective Leadership

All leadership skills fall in three basic characteristics of good leadership: values based, purpose driven, and people centric.

Values based

Effective leaders must know who they are. That starts with a firm grasp of their own values. Values are those strong internal beliefs that govern what we do and how we do it. We find that many leaders, although they may have an idea what they think is important and what they will not tolerate, have not clearly defined their own values. They should. We find that most people have similar values. But, when there is a value conflict there is a problem. That's why it's important for leaders to be able to clearly

articulate their own values. The team must know what the leader expects. If there is a value mismatch within a team, conflict will develop that often cannot be resolved. People do not easily change their values.

Understanding their own values is basic to a person knowing who they are. From there leaders must embrace their strengths and admit their weaknesses. Think about a leader you've known who professed a set of values but then acted in a different way, or consider a leader you've known who tried to pass themselves off as something more than they really were. They claimed skills or abilities that they didn't have. How long did it take to figure out they were not what they professed to be? Probably not long.

Good leaders can clearly define their own values and live by them.

Purpose driven

Much ink has been spilled on the topic of workforce engagement. There is much hang wringing about why team members are not engaged. The answer is simple – leaders haven't asked them to be engaged.

A leader who wants team members to be engaged must give them a reason to be engaged. That's why we've identified the second characteristic of good leaders as purpose driven. If a leader is to develop a truly high performing team, he or she must clearly articulate the team's purpose. That means expressing a compelling vision, defining a clear mission, and establishing definite goals.

People are always looking for leadership, but they want dynamic leadership that clearly presents a path forward that they feel is worth following. A compelling vision is a statement of what a leader sees a team accomplishing in the future. Think of what you would want the team to accomplish if nothing stood in the way. A good vision will make team members say, "Wow. I want to be part of that."

Often we find that teams do not have a clear mission. That's often because they've been together for a long time and have almost become like automatons, doing a job day in and day out, having forgotten why they are doing it or never knowing for sure. A clear mission tells the team what it is really there to do and why they are doing it. Each member of the team should be able to relate what they do directly to accomplishing that mission.

Along with the mission, the team leader must establish clear goals. Good goals give each team member a clearly defined stake in accomplishing the mission.

Team leaders can achieve much better team engagement when they are purpose driven.

People centric

We defined leadership as getting things done through people. People are the most important aspect of leadership. People centric leaders understand the importance of their team members and concentrate on supporting them. As with engagement, there is much discussion about motivation. Leaders must first understand that they cannot motivate people. Motivation is internal to each individual and is based on their own needs. One of those needs, and it is absolutely critical for leaders to understand, is the need to belong. Humans need to belong to something, whether it is a team, a club, or just a tight group of friends. For team leaders, the best action is to provide an environment that helps team members feel they belong.

In the purpose driven section above we mentioned having a clear mission and establishing definite goals. The people centric leader will go beyond just writing down a mission and goals. Those are important, but leaders are most effective when they strive to ensure that each team member clearly understands where they fit in the team. How does their particular contribution lead to accomplishing the goals and achieving the mission? Do they know that? More importantly, do they know that the leader knows and appreciates their contribution?

For a leader to be people centric, they must get to know their team members. What skills does each member bring to the team? What are their strengths? What are their weaknesses? How can you help them develop and become more effective team members?

Sometimes leaders find it difficult to ask these questions. Thoughts such as, “Shouldn’t team members just do what they were hired to do? I’m the team leader, not the camp counselor. I’m just not the touchy feely type” are common. But, being people centric is not any of that. It’s just leaning as much as you can about your team members to understand how they can best contribute and how you can best help them help you.

Leaders must strive to understand as much as possible about their team members. Be people centric.

The Problem with Birthdays

While learning about team members it's often common to stick them into categorical boxes, the most common being generations. This is a very counterproductive approach for leaders and results in making unfounded conclusions about team members. Classifying people by birthday has become common and yet it is completely useless.

The GI generation, born between 1900 and 1927 endured the great depression and World War II. Everyone in that generation was affected in some way by at least one, and usually both of those events, but that is the last generation to be so homogeneous. From that point forward each generation has become more diverse than the one before it. Now, it's common to hear that Millennials are this, or they don't like that.

There are more than 83 million Millennials in the United States. Does it really make sense to say they are all alike? In fact, when they were born is much less important than where they were born and what experiences influenced them. A person born and raised in Los Angeles will have experienced much different influences than one born and raised in a small Midwestern farming community. Neither is better or worse, they are just likely to have a different view of the world.

It's common to see Millennials as the computer generation and it is true that, in large part they did grow up along with the current tech world. But there are still large parts of the country that, until recently, did not have regular access to broadband internet.

Be especially cautious about what is being called Generation Z. A few years ago "experts" were quick to tell us what that generation likes and doesn't like; what they want and will not accept. The problem is, when those assumptions were being made the oldest in that generation was about 17. Think about yourself at 17. Is that the way you would want the world to judge you going forward?

In fact, as we start 2021, one of the best approaches a leader can take is to forget the idea of generations altogether and concentrate on learning who a person is, what they can contribute, and how you can help them be successful.

Who Can You Trust?

The most important aspect of the relationship between leaders and their teams is trust. The team must be able to trust the leader and the leader must be able to trust the team. It really is

that simple in concept, but trust isn't always that simple in reality. The fact is, trust must be earned and can be easily lost.

Leaders earn their team's trust by being their authentic self, doing what they say they will do, and not trying to be perceived as something they are not. When leaders support the team they earn trust. When leaders appear to be out for themselves at the expense of the team, they lose trust.

Leaders must also be able to trust their teams. The first step is establishing the trust of the team. When a leader is truly purpose driven and people centric, they will find the team is more trustworthy. Trust of the leader by the team is reflected in the leader's ability to trust the team.

Establishing and maintaining this trusting relationship is an on-going concern for leaders because if a leader loses the team's trust, they will find it extremely difficult to regain. Loss of trust is often permanent.

It is the leader's responsibility to gain and maintain trust with their teams.

I Know That You Believe You Understand What You Think I Said

Probably the biggest challenge to effective leadership is communication. Whether communication is effective or not, it affects every aspect of a leader's responsibility. Many issues that arise in a team result from communications problems. Leaders must make a concerted and continuous effort to foster effective communication. Oddly enough, in a time when there are more ways than ever to communicate with one another, we seem to have more problems than ever before. Perhaps that's because of the many channels that are available. There are some basic techniques that will help overcome difficulties.

Make sure what you say is really what you meant to say. When we speak, we know what we mean to say, but is that really what comes out?

Make the effort to ensure those you are communicating with understand what you meant to say. Ask questions and ask for questions. Never just assume the correct message has been received.

Make sure what you heard is really the message the other person meant to send. Again, questions are the best tool to ensure effective communication.

Many of our clients work with international teams and so there is often a language barrier. There is also a cultural barrier. It's up to the leader to recognize those potential issues and strive to mitigate them. Sometimes that's difficult but it's an extension of being people centric.

At least in the first part of 2021 there will continue to be extensive use of virtual meetings. Virtual meetings are not all bad, but they add even more potential communication difficulties. Why? Those small thumbnail images of people on a computer screen do not provide nearly the amount of information gained when people are in the same room. We recommend that as soon as possible, you plan to have an in-person meeting with your team. Human interaction is essential to building a truly cohesive team.

Ensuring effective communication is a leader's responsibility.

Conflict And Conflict Avoidance: The Subtle Destruction Of Good Teams

Is conflict good or bad? If you said both, you're right. Good conflict is discussion, debate, and even arguments about the issues. It is from this type of conflict that the best ideas and solutions emerge. Good conflict recognizes that people can be passionate about issues and ideas but that passion is restricted to the issue or idea. Others who disagree are not bad people because they have a different outlook or opposing thoughts.

Bad conflict occurs when the discussion strays from issues or ideas to the individuals involved. Bad conflict involves name calling, insults, and personal attacks and will make team members withdraw from the real issues at hand.

Leaders must work hard to encourage good conflict while prohibiting bad conflict. Don't allow bad conflict to even get a start. Form a team culture that values each member and their individual input with a hard and fast understanding that the elements of bad conflict will not be tolerated. Don't even let it get started.

That sounds simple enough, but of course it isn't. That's why leaders must be constantly vigilant, watching for the beginnings of bad conflict and addressing it early.

As we enter 2021, this challenge has become even more difficult. There are those who are not just easily offended, but are actively looking to be offended. They are not as interested in the issue at hand or new ideas as they are in parsing every bit of what others say. As we talk with supervisors and managers we are finding it's quite common for them to actually be

scared. They don't know how to react and manage this new tendency. They feel that no matter what they do, they are at risk.

One of the most important steps leaders can take in 2021 and beyond is to develop a cohesive team and then be quick to recognize people who are concentrating on finding fault instead of finding solutions. It may be necessary to privately coach these people that their team mates are not trying to offend them and that they are hurting the team by being so overly sensitive to comments that are not meant to be offensive. Yes, this is difficult but it's necessary to avoid another kind of conflict that is really a type of bad conflict.

That is no conflict at all. When team members are afraid to say anything for fear of being censored the team stagnates and will become less and less effective. The fear of upsetting other team members becomes a driving force and will supersede any possibility of the team performing at a high level.

Encourage, even demand good conflict. Stop bad conflict immediately.

Why, Why, Why – Digging for the Root

A skill that makes more effective leaders stand out is the ability to find the root cause of an issue or problem. Root cause analysis is the difference between reacting and finding real solutions. It's also a skill that is desperately important in 2021. It's easy to face a problem by taking the first piece of information and acting on it. In fact that is becoming more important as our society tends to be going in the opposite direction. There are two steps to help you exercise better leadership by understanding the real issue rather than just acting on a lack of information.

1. Don't rely on the first thing you hear. Initial reports are at best incomplete and most often just wrong. If you need to take emergency steps, fine, but don't do more than necessary until you have a better understanding of the issue.
2. Ask why – multiple times. As you try to determine the real story ask why. The answer you get at first will probably be superficial so you need to ask why again. The answer this time will have a little more fidelity. Keep asking why and after several times you will have drilled down to the root cause. Now you can take more informed, and more effective, action.
3. Don't rely on personalities. Just because someone is your favorite team member doesn't mean they have the right answer. Likewise, just because you don't like

someone doesn't mean they don't have the right answer. It's natural to have more synergy with some people than others, but don't let that cloud your decision making.

Asking why to drill down to the root of a problem should usually be a team effort. The collective knowledge and experience of the team will produce better answers faster. This is also the first step in finding the best way to deal with the issue.

Remember the saying that ignorance is simply not knowing. Everyone is ignorant of some things. Stupidity is knowingly acting when ignorant.

Where are the Leaders for 2021?

When a crisis hits, you must deal with it with the leaders you had yesterday. That means developing good leaders must be an on-going process. Unfortunately it is all too common to promote someone to a supervisory or managerial position because they are effective in their job, and then not give them an opportunity to learn the required new skills. The result is a supervisor or manager who 1) doesn't really see themselves as a leader, and 2) uses the techniques he has learned from leaders he or she has experienced. That might be okay if they had leaders who understood how to be good leaders, but in our experience is more likely to result in perpetuating the same leadership problems.

It's always been important to choose the right people for leadership positions, but as we recover from past challenges and strive to move forward, it's important to find and develop the best leaders we can.

Where to look for future leaders

There are a couple of places to look for potential leaders. One is the informal groups that develop in any organization. Recognize where these groups are and who seems to lead them. They are the ones the group turns to for help or clarification.

Sometimes these people are quiet and non-confrontational; they may not even consider themselves to be leaders. But when things need to be done, you'll find them in the middle of it.

Look for the workers who seem to accomplish more than their peers. Just who is making things work is not always easy to spot, but chances are there are a couple of people who are the catalyst for success or are at least working hard to make things happen. These are the people you'll want to seriously evaluate.

Be careful of people who are just loud, the ones always complaining about this policy or that assignment. You'll probably notice that when there is discontent, they are in the middle of it; always ready to tell anyone who will listen that something is unfair. They seldom if ever have any suggestions for a better way and seem to think their only purpose in life is to complain. To be fair, some of these people can be turned into good leaders, but doing so is hard.

Always be on the lookout for that "diamond in the rough." Every so often you'll have someone on your team who, at first glance, doesn't seem to possess much leadership potential. But, as you observe them, you see a little spark of something, maybe a little leadership talent that is masked by a gruff or even unfriendly exterior. This is someone who is a contributing member of the organization, but who comes across as unpolished and maybe a little coarse. They may be a little more difficult to develop, but the extra effort will produce a superior leader.

Testing the potential leader

You have your eye on Jane. She seems to have potential to take on more responsibility and become a good leader. Terrific! But before you go any farther, you need to ensure Jane is really the right person for future leadership roles. You need to ask yourself a few questions and observe for the answers.

Does Jane subscribe to the company's values? Does she exhibit personal values which are compatible with yours? If not, it will be very difficult to work with her. She may have potential but a value mismatch is very hard to overcome.

How does she get along with her co-workers? Leadership is not a popularity contest, but someone who doesn't have a relatively good rapport with their peers will probably have a hard time working with anyone.

Is she reliable and trustworthy? You're going to be placing more and more authority and responsibility in her hands. A lack of integrity or reliability will come back to you and can damage your effectiveness and reputation.

After you've answered these questions and you think you have your potential new leader pegged, you need to do a little testing to see if you have it right.

First, get to know as much as possible about her. What's her work record? Have there been problems with rules or policies in the past? Is she reliable? What are her strengths and weaknesses?

Second, carefully observe her on the job. Be inconspicuous about this as your very presence can change behavior. Watch to see how she interacts with others. Is she courteous with fellow workers and with her own boss? Human relationship skills are important and, in general, people who can't get along with others usually don't make very good leaders. Watch for the person who appears to carry a grudge. There may be a good reason for that and it might be something that can be resolved; but, it might also just be a sign of someone who is never happy with anything.

Third, use a small task (a genuine requirement, not something made up for the purpose) to give Jane a chance to show leadership. Don't expect an amazing transformation to happen at this point; just watch to see how she handles the situation. What you're really looking for is how she attempts to accomplish the task. Actual success is of less importance.

You may have someone who thinks they are the next great leader, but who you just don't feel has the kind of potential you're looking for. Don't string them on. It's tempting to let a subordinate think they are in line for the next big promotion and use that expectation to entice them to do all manner of difficult or unpleasant tasks. That's not fair and will just cause discontent in the end. Be honest and if they don't measure up to what you're looking for, tell them.

Developing Your Leaders

One of the most important tasks a leader has is to develop future leaders. Some leaders don't like that idea for two reasons. First, they fear that the person they developed as a leader will end up taking their job. Consider this. Are you really irreplaceable? If you really can't be replaced then you won't be. Ever. That next promotion will go to someone else.

The second fear is that developing a team member will result in losing a good team member. But conversely, if a team member thinks they can't ever move up, they will lose their desire to excel.

So, how can you develop future leaders?

1. Give them opportunities to lead. Start with something small that won't be disastrous if you have to step in at the last minute.
2. Let them observe you. There may be times when you have to keep things close to the vest, but let your protégé watch how you handle challenges and even set-backs

3. Use your coaching sessions to steer them toward more responsibility. Your goal is not to just help them improve on the job, but to also recognize opportunities to go beyond their current position.
4. Make sure your boss can see your protégé. It's a common practice to hide your best people so they won't be taken away. Make it clear that you see potential in this person and you are grooming them for future success.
5. Send them to real leadership training. We don't recommend the one-day, cover everything, fire hose treatment. It takes serious education and training to develop real leadership skills. Then give them opportunities to practice those skills.

Most leaders like to think that they will leave something behind to be remembered for. One of the best legacies you can have is to be known as the leader who unselfishly helped others succeed.

Conclusion

We will only know for sure what 2021 brings in December. Whatever the year has in store for us, whether it's good or bad, your team and your company will be able to react and/or benefit when you have good leaders in place. As there is no genetic predisposition to good leadership your only option is to make sure you have the right leaders in place and that they have a good grasp on basic leadership skills and how to apply those skills in their own situation. The success of the team and the company starts with values based, purpose driven, and people centric leaders.