Rethinking Leadership

Businesses need a new approach to the practice of leadership — and to leadership development.

Joseph A. Raelin
WE HAVE SPENT so much time and space, even in this magazine, looking for leadership in all the wrong places. Leadership is really not about leaders themselves. It’s about a collective practice among people who work together — accomplishing the choices we make together in our mutual work.

That’s not, of course, the conventional notion of leadership. Beginning in the 19th century, the “Great Man” theory of leadership held that the historical march of civilization occurs based on the deeds of great individual leaders. Furthermore, these great leaders were thought to have been born with particular traits that accorded them greatness. Their deeds flowed from their personalities.

Even though the study of leadership has since moved on to such factors as leadership styles and behaviors, the charismatic ideal of prominent leaders remains. Derived from the Greek, charisma has a meaning of both a gift and a grace that allows certain individuals to sway others and shape the future by their sheer presence and personality.

But we’re at somewhat of a crossroads now in discerning just how successful the world’s great charismatic leaders have been over the past two centuries. Some might argue that our world is at a higher state of peaceful coexistence than at any prior time. However, others might contend that the human race is closer to the brink of extinction than at any time in history — and that our leaders have brought us to this point.

What’s more, within corporations, there is a concern that, given such conditions as accessible communications technology, size and complexity, top-down oversight by leaders has limitations. For example, a September 2014 article from HR magazine quoted Simon Lloyd, HR director of the bank Santander UK, as observing that “technology is freeing things up”; he went...
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on to say that because of the sheer size of organizations, “trying to impose a command-and-control structure doesn’t work.” In the same article, Betsy Sutter, corporate senior vice president and chief people officer at VMware Inc., was quoted as saying that, because of the rapid pace of change, “you can’t expect to be able to scale, transform and win if you’re not creating agile models. If it’s top-down, it moves too slowly.”

We can gain insights into a new model of leadership from the late Nelson Mandela, the former president of South Africa and one of the greatest figures of our time. Mandela frequently emphasized the shared nature of leadership and was known for giving credit to others. For example, when honored for his role in ending apartheid, he would note that abolishing apartheid was a collective endeavor. Perhaps one of the most important leadership lessons we might distill from Mandela was not his acquisition of leadership but the way he shared it.

Mandela’s approach suggests a new way of thinking about leadership — not as a set of traits possessed by particularly gifted individuals, but as a set of practices among those engaged together in realizing their choices. This kind of leadership involves activities such as scanning the environment, mobilizing resources and inviting participation, weaving interactions across existing and new networks and offering feedback and facilitating reflection.

It also means that leadership development will require a different approach from standard training that pulls managers out of their workplaces to attend sessions that presume to teach leadership competencies. If leadership is a collaborative activity, it makes little sense to teach leadership to individuals in a public setting detached from the very group where leadership is needed to occur. Managers may learn particular competencies or skills in a class — but may not find them applicable to the real problems back in their home environment. Even the consultation of best practices may fall flat, since it is the instant practice within the immediate setting that requires the most attention.

This doesn’t mean that leadership training isn’t necessary; rather, it should be done in a way that responds to immediate needs and in conjunction with formal and informal work-based developmental experiences, such as peer mentoring, coaching, apprenticeship, group process reflection and action learning. In thinking about how to develop leadership within a group, we may need to find ways to bring more of the unconscious and unreflective into the conscious and intentional domain. We need to study instances of failure, dissonance, crisis and obstruction in the workplace — or even surprises that spur creativity.

One of the methods available to instigate this kind of reflective dialogue is action learning, in which participants stop and reflect on real-time problems occurring in their own work environments. Action learning requires managers to make a concerted effort to observe and reflect together on the practices that have bottom-line impact. The information technology company Cisco, based in San Jose, California, has used action learning to link the company’s growth and collaborative strategies with leadership development. Through programs like Cisco’s, employees learn leadership development in the context of their jobs and while learning to grow the business.

The upshot of this article is not to suggest we do away with leaders as much as it is to unhook leadership from any insistence that it’s all about transferring instructions from “those who know” to “those who don’t.” In fast-moving business environments, we can’t keep dampening the energy and creativity of those condemned to follower status. Instead, we need a collective, self-correcting model of leadership in which participants learn to engage with one another and reflect on their own actions so that they can learn in the moment and improve their ongoing practices. Leadership in this sense is returned to the group doing the work — rather than solidified around an individual who is making decisions for others.

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