



Experience Leadership

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21st Century Leadership: Are you digging in the right place?

Complexity, rapid change, information overload, meaningful work and endeavors, enormously difficult decisions and a global economic malaise are but a few of the daunting challenges that face people in organizations today. Perhaps no time in history has the need for bold and effective leadership been more needed, demanded or required. Yet it seems the ability to respond to this call for leadership is inadequate because by some expert accounts leadership development is going nowhere fast. These are the findings of the last two biennial global leadership forecasts conducted by Development Dimensions International where on average more than 14,000 executives and HR managers from over 70 countries were surveyed.

Just think of it, after spending billions of dollars on talent management initiatives, on behavioral screening, on performance measurement equations and metrics, leadership development is going nowhere fast? How can this be? Where are the leaders, where is the leadership? Perhaps the answer lays in a lesson from the movie Indiana Jones and The Raiders of the Lost Arc. As Indy and Sallah learned when they searched for the Well of the Souls in hopes of finding the Arc of the Covenant, make sure your digging in the right place!

Say the word leadership and it means different things to different people even though many are drawn to the notion of a positional or heroic leader. In 1978 James MacGregor Burns, the patriarch of leadership thought in America, wrote that the predominant leadership approach tends often unconsciously to be elitist; it projects heroic figures against the shadowy background of drab powerless, masses. In the idea economy, where Peter Drucker pronounced the knowledge worker as the leading class, this notion of leadership is an aberration completely out of touch with the reality of today's world. Have you been on the Internet lately-- not a really drab and powerless place?

Yet it seems we continue to dig in the same place although at a frenzied pace. That place is marked by a factory mindset--an industrial perspective portrayed as an indescribable set of traits fully owned by the leader who sits at the top of the organization. In the factory mindset, whatever the leader does is leadership. All we have to do is make better leaders follow their orders and we will be saved!

The fact is that the ideas and principles of the leadership models built for industrial times are grossly limited and incongruent for an interconnected, extremely aware, technology and information enraptured society. A society that is surrounded by rapid complex change and charged with making infinitely difficult decisions and who, at the core of its being, seeks purpose and meaning from the work it does.

In this environment, the job of leaders is changing dramatically as innovation, leadership and learning at all levels of an organization have become the lynchpins of creative success. 21st century leadership must focus on melding a multitude of diverse talent and individual ability into collaborative, interdependent, and unified action capable of addressing the most complex and intractable issues and challenges.

The challenge for all 21st century leaders is to create environments built on mutual trust and continuous learning where participants in these leadership-dynamics are fully engaged, derive meaning, take ownership and responsibility for the results, and come to do their best work each and everyday. In the 21st Century, organizations must expand their thinking and act outside of the box with a notion of leadership that views participants as fully involved partners that bring talent, energy, creativity and combined action to bear on the issues at hand. In the 21st Century leadership is no longer a noun, but a verb where the actions of a committed group of people teach us that leadership is what people do together. Perhaps, it has always been so. Now, start digging!

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