Leading from a Values-Based Approach in the Workplace.

By Gary Marka
If you answered negatively to these questions because of your own leadership experiences, then most likely you have relied on the leadership approaches of the past to guide your decision-making within your organizations, and basically, it hasn't worked for you. Gilbert Fairholm (1991) points out leaders tend to utilize three basic models or theories of leadership—"who the leader is, what the leader does, and where leadership takes place" (p. 28). Such theories may work some of the time in certain situations, but never all of the time across contexts because they tend to be manipulative and self-serving for the leader. Essentially, they provide amoral or inauthentic leadership lenses because, when dealing with change, they have failed the persons who are in non-leadership roles. These approaches do not give the follower what they truly want—a basic respect for their human dignity. As leadership roles become more diffused within the organization, the mere presence of basic respect within an organization will become a deal-breaker for persons assuming leadership roles. Integrating common values into our leadership practice is an effective way to build respect into our daily interactions within the organization.

You may wonder whether a values-based leadership approach actually works better than older leadership theories. If so, can it actually work across all contexts in a constantly changing environment? I believe there are two basic reasons why values-based leadership actually serves today's work environment.

First, the values-based leadership approach emphasizes the individual rather than the organization in the work setting. In so doing, it elevates the individual's needs and wants over the organization's. Unlike some of the past models, this approach isn't about doing unto others as we think it should be done (golden rule), but rather doing unto them as they would have us do unto them (platinum rule). In pursuing this approach, we are serving, not manipulating others.

Second, this philosophy also produces two fundamental results; the other leadership approaches do not—"stronger, committed, flexible people" and "followers who are capable of independent self-direction" (Fairholm, 1991, p. x). James MacGregor Burns (1978) also asserts that this type of transforming leadership "is a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral leaders" (p. 4). Isn't this the outcome we are truly looking for from people within our organizations—self-directed, interdependent leaders? I know I am.

The biggest concern I had when I initiated a values-based leadership approach within my programming board was that it didn't come easy and felt unnatural to me. I discovered that to overcome bureaucratic restraints and to effectively face change, I must be willing to be myself in order to change myself. I had to stop relying on formulas, techniques, or basic skills to get by. It was important that I develop an entrepreneurial attitude based on people, philosophy, and process instead of relying on maintaining the status quo. Peter Block (1987) distinguishes between these directions by stating "that an entrepreneurial mind-set is equivalent to being political in a positive way" and that "a bureaucratic mind-set is equivalent to acting out negative politics as we know it" (p. 11). By basing my leadership approach on values, I found I could empower others to be entrepreneurs instead of bureaucrats. The positive impact this approach made on the entire membership of our programming board was amazing.

In reality, the forces resistant to change are of our own making. To provide order in our chaotic world and reduce our anxiety we have accepted poor leadership in our organizations and have adopted inadequate systems that worship maintenance, caution and dependency (Block, 1987 and Lipman-Blumen, 2001). Our bureaucratic systems dehumanize people and tend to turn us into static agents resistant to change. The traditional leadership approaches sometimes work well within these systems, but not in the greater global context of today's post-modern world. We've all heard the statement "if it ain't broke then don't fix it." What if our past leadership frameworks for action never truly worked well to begin with? The juxtaposition between this statement and subsequent question gives new and dubious meaning to maintaining the status quo. Values-based leadership breaks us out of this norm and creates an environment of established leaders empowering new leaders from followers.

How does a person lead from a values-based perspective in his or her workplace? If values-based leadership is "values driven, change-oriented, and developmental" (Fairholm, 1991, p. x), then what steps must we take as leaders to establish this philosophy in our workplace? I have found the following four-step process to be effective for me when working with student organizations.

**Step 1: Identify your values and adopt a leadership framework for action.**

- Develop an inclusive, shared process with all members of your organization to research and identify your core ethical values.
- Explore the personal, business, cultural, historical, religious, philosophical and ethical domains that exist in your organization, department, university and community, or what I call the big value picture.

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- Determine the common ground that exists between these values.
- Determine if these identified values operate at a universal level and value level for all members of your organization. If not, frame them so they do.
- Adopt the values as a leadership framework for action using the consensus model of decision-making. Basically, everyone concudes that if they truly believe in these values, they will act in an agreed upon, respectful manner.

**Step 2: Identify the strengths and challenges of your organizational members through self-discovery activities and instruments so each person may find the leader within.**

- Provide a leadership style instrument to help individuals change and grow so they can be proactive contributors to group action.
- Provide experiential activities on the stages of group development and teamwork so organizational members can explore the benefits of synergistic group action and collaboration. Empower your organizational members to be authentic leaders and/or followers and to understand how their actions or lack thereof impact the entire group.
Step 3: Create a strategic vision for the organization and establish a visioning culture that pervades all levels of the organization.

Identify the forces of change within the environment and chart a future course for your organization based on the values you identified and adopted in step one.

Communicate and share the vision with all stakeholders by eliciting feedback and broad participation from members inside and outside the organization. Integrate the feedback and amend the vision as needed.

Take action on the vision by attaching goals, objectives, and deadlines to the vision statement.

Step 4: Establish participative structures where power and responsibility are shared at all levels of the organization.

Create committees, work teams, task forces, councils, etc., where freedom exists and everyone has a voice.

Effective leadership is usually the result of someone translating their intention or vision into a practical reality that is adopted by others. This visioning process, a core component of values-based leadership (1995), the only true course for the leader is to build a vision that followers adopt as their own because it is their own. If we are to achieve our vision and truly effect substantial change in the workplace, we have no choice but to lead.

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Values-Based Leadership Is the Leadership of Change

How do we transform our followers into leaders of change? We must focus on enlisting their hearts and minds through inclusion, participation and respect for all in order for trust to develop between the leader and the follower. MacGregor Burns (1978) states that “Moral leadership emerges from, and always returns to, the fundamental wants and needs, aspirations, and values, of the followers” (p.4). What truly creates trust in the end is the leader’s respect for their followers. Simply put, leaders must serve their followers by listening to and putting them first. It is the most effective way to ensure that our organizations not only survive the change, but also thrive within it.

Values-based leadership is the leadership of change because leadership based on values provides motivation for innovation and unity at all levels of the organization. Leadership based on values is the glue that will hold organizations together in a constantly changing world. This glue, or what we might normally call trust, will develop only if your leadership approach is based on shared purpose, shared vision, and most importantly, shared values.

The Pull of Inspiring Values Versus the Push Toward the Status Quo

Instead of pushing or commanding change, O’Toole (1995) suggests that leaders must instead adopt the unnatural behavior of always leading by the pull of inspiring values (p. 11). Leaders must be constant in exemplifying their values. Values-based leadership is not situational, even though it can be broadly applied in all situations. However, leaders must live it—day in and day out. Effective leaders do what they value regardless of the situation or context. Weak or ineffective leaders will bend their ethics to fit the situation. Effective leadership is a lifelong commitment to always live with a high moral purpose. It is the always that matters. This is the true essence of values-based leadership.

References:


About the Author

Gary Manka is assistant director/program board advisor in the Office of Student Activities and Organization Leadership at Miami University (OH). He holds a bachelor’s degree in English/creative writing from the University of South Florida and a master’s degree in college student personnel from Miami University (OH). He has varied experience in advising, leadership development, programming, student employment, desktop publishing, graphic arts and college union operations.