

Leadership for the creative class

03 Dec 2009 | Mitch McCrimmon

The creative class – innovative knowledge workers in all sectors of the economy - will rule the 21st century. So argued social scientist Richard Florida in [a seminal article](#) (and later a book), written in 2002. But what does it mean for creative class employees to show leadership? And what does this imply for conventional leadership?

Creative ideas are used to challenge the status quo, not to climb the ladder or to get work done through others. With little interest in managing people, creative class employees show leadership by promoting a better way.

Reframing the contribution of front-line innovators as leadership can better engage, motivate and retain them. If asking employees for suggestions gets them thinking, asking them to show some leadership can supercharge them.

Why current thinking about leadership is a mess

We unquestioningly view leadership as a role. In fact, executives are really managers. If creative thinking is the source of new directions, then leadership cannot be a role. Leadership that is not role-based is free-floating, occasional action.

Here are some examples of leadership that is not role-based:

- The developer of Playstation led his bosses to accept this product when their image of Sony did not allow toys.
- Jack Welch's ideas, such as being first or second in a market, had a leadership impact on businesses where he was neither a formal nor informal leader.
- A new customer service associate with higher service standards has a leadership impact on colleagues just by setting an example – even if this person has no talent to be a team leader.
- Leadership also occurs between competitors. Apple has shown leadership to Microsoft, the music industry and now the cell phone business.

These instances of leadership show the way for others either by promoting a new direction or by setting an example.

Martin Luther King, Jr. showed leadership by protesting against segregation on buses in Alabama. He had a leadership impact on the U.S. Supreme Court which succeeded when the Supreme Court ruled segregation on buses unconstitutional. His leadership on this

issue had nothing to do with taking charge of a group to achieve a goal. His leadership, as a one-off act, ended once those with the authority bought his proposals.

How our thinking about leadership got confused

Prior to the late 1970s, executives were managers. But the crisis of Japan's business success in the West led to a vicious attack on managers for being bureaucratic which led to their replacement by leaders.

We had some ready-made language to separate leaders from managers. Where once we talked of management style as initiating structure versus showing consideration for people, being task oriented versus people oriented or theory X versus theory Y, we now granted all the good guy styles to leaders and saddled management with the bad guy styles.

The next step was to portray leaders as transformational and managers as transactional. Who would want to be a manager after that?

A way out

If leadership really does provide direction, but only as an occasional, then we can upgrade management to take responsibility for an organization's prosperity. With no reference to style, managers can be as considerate, nurturing, empowering and transformational as they need to be. Inspiring leadership moves us to change direction while inspiring managers move us to work harder or smarter.

Power shift

Leadership has always been based on power. Once it was the power to get to the top. Where innovation rules, it is the power to convince people to change direction with a better idea. It is hard to dominate a group for long with creative ideas because they shift too quickly from one person to another.

With creative class leadership, ideas matter more than personality or style. Content really is king! We can buy an idea without joining the advocate's club. The charismatic leader exemplifies the triumph of style over substance (content) while creative class leadership is the reverse: the triumph of content over style.

The bottom line: When leadership is role-based, we look for types of persons suitable for such roles. When we switch to one-off acts of creative class leadership, the type of person promoting a new direction is of little consequence. It is all about content now.

Leadership as influence

Leadership is commonly viewed as an influence process, but this is a myth for senior executives. They may influence their immediate teams to make an acquisition but it is then presented as a decision to the rest of the organization. So, either executives don't show leadership to the rest of the organization or leadership is not in fact an influence process in their case.

Prospective political leaders influence the electorate to get elected but once in power we judge them to be effective as long as they make sound decisions. In short, conventional leadership is really about making sound decisions by those we entrust with this responsibility.

What then becomes of our intuition that leadership really is an influence process? When Martin Luther King's speeches led the U.S. Supreme Court to rule segregation on buses unconstitutional, he relied on pure influence.

Leadership, like sales, is a form of influence. A key feature of selling is that it can be done on a one-off basis. Anyone can sell something once on eBay. This also shows that selling can occur at a distance. The leadership impact of Jack Welch on businesses around the world and of Martin Luther King on the population at large are also one-off impacts shown from a distance, not ongoing roles. Leading and selling are not identical; selling is self-interested, leadership is not. So, if leadership is genuinely a form of influence then there is no reason to limit it to role occupants.

What executives are doing when not showing leadership

By virtue of their roles, executives are managers, where management is suitably upgraded to a supportive, facilitative and nurturing function.

If leadership promotes a better way, then management executes existing directions. But management is not limited to keeping the status quo ticking over. It can manage complex tasks like putting the first man on the moon, even managing change. Once we free management from its theory X, controlling, task oriented connotations, it can be as empowering, nurturing and facilitative as it needs to be to get the best out of creative class knowledge workers.

Leadership sell the tickets for the journey while management drives the bus to the destination. This means that leadership has nothing to do with managing people or getting things done through them.

Chief executives show leadership by promoting a new vision. The difference is that executives are also managers charged with implementing their ideas through people.

Managers need to be emotionally intelligent. For leadership, interpersonal skills are not essential in situations where compelling content can win people over. Leadership viewed as challenging the status quo is based on youthful rebelliousness, the drive of young people to challenge authority and change the world.

Such leadership can be shown by lone technical geeks with no desire or ability to be managers. What could be more empowering and engaging for the talent that businesses are so desperate to retain?

Implementing this leadership reinvented

Reinventing leadership is urgent for businesses that depend on constant innovation. Helping employees achieve their full potential improves the return on such resources.

The challenge for senior executives is to move from being goal scorers (promoting their own ideas) to being facilitators, thus drawing solutions out of others and encouraging leadership in them.

The bottom line: Recognizing creative class employees as leaders is far more engaging than leaving them dependent on managers for leadership, something they are increasingly powerless to provide.

This is not about giving creative class employees permission to show more leadership. The truth is that they are already the real source of leadership wherever innovation is essential for success. Reframing conventional leadership as facilitative is a failure to face reality, a head-in-the-sand tactic to maintain the myth of positional leadership.