

Paradigm shift of Leadership: Leaders in Information Technology

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Abstract:

They say if the leader limps, all the others will start limping too. Therefore, a very dynamic leadership at all levels within the IT Community is critical to the success of an organization. This paper is an attempt to study the relationship between Information Technology (IT) with leadership and assesses its relevancy in today's fast-paced hi-tech globalized environment. The paper strives to look into the essential qualities and knowledge as needed by today's IT leader, in contrast to essential characteristics common to all the leaders- past, present, and future.

Keywords: *Leadership, Autocratic Leaders, Characteristics of IT leaders, Skills of IT Professionals, IT Leadership.*

INTRODUCTION

Many small scale software houses were closed although they were having many projects under development and many in pipeline. I was thinking why it happened, but found no answer; so I asked one of a programmer there. "Well," he said, "Nobody leads the organization. Somebody has to be the leader."

Is it necessary for groups to be led by the boss or a leader? Does this need differ by type of group? If so, what kind of a leader must IT professional should be? Should IT professional be a stereo type boss or different from that one?

What roles do leaders play? Do they influence, guide, structure, support, provide vision or do they dominate? The definitions of leadership vary with the situations. Another important aspect is whether leadership is a born trait, or it is a set of skills that can be learnt? Whether leadership is rocket science that can be grasped by only few or nearly everyone can learn the fundamentals?

The answers are very important as leadership is so critical and becomes necessary in many situations. While we often glorify or vilify vivid individuals—Prophet Mohammad, Adolph Franklin, Hitler or Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, Queen Elizabeth I, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Mahatma Gandhi, Mandela, Steve Job, Bill Gates or other prominent figures, any police officer, fire fighter, teacher, parents, and other everyday persons who continue to play their role as a leader in countless situations. If leadership is a set of skills, then we all are prospective of being a leader in some situation.

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

According to Vance Packard “Leadership is the art of getting others to want to do something you are convinced should be done”. Leadership involves persuading team members in the direction of collective, inter-reliant goals. It also includes harmonization of approach and conduct of members in pursuit of these mutual goals. These groups are lead through multi-dimensional resources and range of styles to direct and influence their activities.

Although leadership is asymmetric, i.e., the direction of commands and conducts is from leaders to group members than vice-versa, but leadership still has communal properties, where we find exchange and conciliation between leaders and its groups. One cannot lead without reception. In competent societies where more informal or volunteer groups prevail, leadership drives consistency rather than compliance.

According to Levin, Lippett and White's we find three main types of leadership.

- The autocratic leader – who set rules and make sure that they are carried out,
- The democratic leader –who work with the team to set group agendas,
- The laissez-faire leader - who let everyone do pretty much as he pleased.

Among three, autocratic style of leadership is the most practiced one. Autocratic leadership is an extreme form of transactional leadership, where leader has supreme power over his team. The expression of creativity and innovation is restricted and members have little opportunity to speak even it is in interest of the team or organization. Most people are offended for being treated like this. Autocratic leadership usually leads to high levels of disapprovals, absenteeism and staff turnover. In spite of the lack of creativity the style remains effective in situations where control needs to be outweighed. According to early research several traits common in the autocratic leader are:

- They initiate and maintain group composition.
- Sets directions about series of actions.
- Ensure on-task behavior.
- Focus on productivity and end results.
- Carries out “downward only” channel of communication and control from leaders to followers.

Both democratic and autocratic leaders commence formation however, autocratic leaders insist on hierarchy. These adamant traits may enrage some group members and create friction thus affecting the productivity and organizational environment.

SKILLS NEEDED FOR IT PROFESSIONALS

If each of us hires people who are smaller than we are, we shall become a company of dwarfs. But if each of us hires people who are bigger than we are, we shall become a company of giants. To put up this notional company of giants we need to attain the essential skills to recruit, direct and manage people smarter than ourselves. Leading smart and creative people is not easy in any field. However, leading IT experts come with an additional set of challenges as technology continues transforming at spectacular pace. Smart, charismatic, innovative and creative IT Leaders should:

No Micro Management: As a leader, you may want to “tell” people about the tasks they should perform but there stands a slim line between providing comprehensive instructions and “micro-managing.” This spurs troubles when you are leading smart folks. Smart people may not want to be micro-managed but want to have their own attitudes and beliefs on how something has to be accomplished. The key, therefore, is to explore alternatives by soliciting rather than telling.

“Okay” attitude: Smart people are high risk takers and buck the norm and go their own way. In doing that, there are good chances of getting crashed and burnt. Such an environment should be crafted where it’s OK to fail at times. Though it is better to play safe, we need to take premeditated risks to expect big rewards.

Streamline at intervals: Smart organizations need to revolutionize path with shifting demands. Smart people are the same. Their level of interests and priority vary with time.

Keep them charged: Smart people are enthusiastic and daring enough to have challenging projects. Tasks with lesser creativity and ingenuity stray them and lower down their inspirations.

Lead them from front: Everyone desires the environment where learning experience is enhanced which leads to higher professional development. If organization does not provide an infrastructure for growth, switch over of smart people will be more even if the pay is good. While there are no ideal metrics to gauge a person's professional and emotional escalation, one simple way to ascertain this is to have a glance on what people have grown to be over a phase of time. For instance, if performance and vision of someone has not increased over a period of time, there is a problem. The problem can be with the person or can be with the environment of organization.

Vigorous environment: Organizations that value physical and mental workouts foster both the environment of organization and efficiency of its employees. Aligning such activities with organizational objectives is the dire need so as to create healthy and stress free environment. Smart employees love this kind of liberty and, of course, they will make up for this at times when you need them most. Unfortunately, this kind of freedom is not adapted in most organizations even though it would become one of your competitive advantages.

LEADERSHIP AND IT PERSPECTIVE

"You can't teach what you don't know, and you can't lead where you won't go" (Jesse Jackson)

Leadership demands continuous development of skills and attitudes in all positions. The IT leadership is no exception, however this development should be carried out progressively and continuously rather than taking it as a onetime activity. IT professionals must start culturing this expertise early in their career; so as to stand a good chance of turning the skills into habits—and of becoming successful and effective IT professionals and later on effectual Leaders. Today's society demands a great deal of

knowledge based information and communication and that also in a prompt manner. To accomplish this accuracy and agility IT professionals should be empowered with the knowledge, skills, and abilities that recent technology offers. Though the persona that IT leadership carries entails many characteristics universal to all leaders, but also calls for unique and exclusive competences and insight into technology's impact.

According to Retired General Colin Powell (1996), leadership in this millennium will be essentially the same as that of Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, or other great leaders of yesterday-it will require that people have a vision of where they want to lead, how to choose the right people, and how to accomplish objectives that flow from visions. However, the major challenge that the leaders of 21st century are equipped with is to having the strong insight into the multifold transformation in different realms of society. This change is the consequence of agile and globally centered information and technology upheaval. So to be a strongly positioned leader within this new era one must be able to maximize the use of powerful tools that this new change has to offer.

RISING IT LEADERSHIP PARADIGM

Today it is completely different to be an IT leader than it was few years back. Today leaders should be capable enough to create a safe to fall environment where everyone is empowered to incorporate change. Experts agree that when it comes to IT management areas evolve rapidly creating challenges for the leaders. The speed of change in technology will always have you some of your staff highly motivated and energetic to learn the hottest new tools, and you need to keep them out front so that they stay engaged. On the other hand, you have other leaders that tire of always having to learn a new technology and want to focus only on the business aspect of technology delivery with the same old tools. It comes as an important challenge for the IT leader to manage both types

of people and have the right mix of staff members to stay technologically savvy and business-focused at the same time. Hence general leadership traits won't help enough in IT deepened organizations, but leaders have to continuously foster the competencies to use and evaluate tools for the future of organizations.

Senge (1990) defines leadership in this manner; Leaders are designers, stewards and teachers. They are responsible for building organizations where people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision and improve shared mental models--that is, they are responsible for learning (p. 340). IT leaders will be learners who would be evaluating themselves continuously, and will value learning as a fundamental force and the gateway to survival for the future. The shifting paradigm of the workforce which is extremely diverse in nature confronts new challenges of downsizing and declining corporate loyalty. This shift demands a revolutionary leader who can bring together lacking confidence and who is supple and is aware of the constraints brought about by advanced telecommunications.

According to Capowski (1994), Leadership for the IT era must focus on encouraging and sustaining corporate nurturing and provide an atmosphere where innovation is encouraged and creativity is rewarded. Thus, IT leaders should devise ways to depict healthy corporate structures and systems, human nature, moral order, value development, effects of personal choice, and personal similarities and differences. The IT leader should reflect his capacity to effect change rather than depicting autocratic and despotic behavior.

CONCLUSION

Leadership is not about administrating people. It is about invoking a fire within them, not underneath them. Managers are given authority over others from above; Leaders are

given authority from those they lead. Unlike an autocratic leader the effective leader entails the respect and support of those that are being led. Leaders need to have a vision, develop a plan and then lead by example. Leadership involves leading a team to function at peak performance with maximum cooperation and enthusiasm.

To maximize the effectiveness, IT professionals need to possess both the hard technical skills as well as the soft people skills. Organizations should conduct interactive trainings and workshops to build people skills, besides investing in technical trainings for IT. Soft skills will help IT professionals to hear the needs of customers, communicate in their language, manage expectations, builds trust and resolve issues. The IT leader must be a self-achiever and should be motivated to become a proactive leader and role model. The IT leader must be ready to embrace that change. Globalization, fierce competition, the remarkably diverse workforce, the continuing explosion of information and technology, economic and social upheaval are only a few of a plethora of signals from the marketplace we must begin to heed. The message is clear:

If survival is the aim, change is the game--change not only in how our work gets done, but in how we think about our work, our enterprises, ourselves and our lives and this sums up that IT Professionals can't be autocratic leaders since their profession requires soft skills and the more need to be Transformational and Charismatic leaders rather than transactional or conventional. This field is dynamic and challenging and generates best results with maximum creation and innovation, which is only possible by involving subordinates and motivating them to come up with creative ideas keeping into consideration technological demands and client requirements. This approach to lead the team is the only key to remain active in IT Industry.

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