

# Managing, Leading, and Everything in Between

*Understanding the differences between leading and managing is important for success.*

By Alan E. Nelson, Ed.D.



**W**hat does it mean to be a leader? As a student and teacher of organizational behavior, I'm intrigued by the various notions of leadership. Anyone who is in a role deemed "leader" should understand some of the practical issues related to what is and is not "leading."

During the past several years, I've worked on an organizational leadership skills training curriculum for young people ages 10–18, learned how to identify students who are gifted in leading, and developed those students to catalyze social and climate change in the organizations with which they interact. That work has launched a number of interesting discussions about how we define leadership.

More than 95% of the leadership books in my library don't formally define the term, yet everyone talks about it. So, here's our stake in the ground for the purpose of this article: *Leadership is the process of helping people accomplish together what they could not accomplish as individuals. Leaders are the individuals who get*

*this process going.* That definition separates leadership from other things that we may *call* leadership, such as management.

## Manager or Leader?

In 1977, Abraham Zaleznik wrote what is now a classic *Harvard Business Review* article titled "Managers and Leaders: Are They Different?" The professor brilliantly juxtapositions the two roles, differentiating how differently managers think and behave from leaders.

Although we often use the two terms interchangeably, they're arguably different with regard to mind-set. The way people see themselves in relation to the organization affects how they interact with it. Zaleznik refers to leaders as "twice-borns"; they gain their identity outside the organization they serve, and are thus more inclined to pursue change within the organization. Managers gain their identity from the organization itself and are less motivated to bring about change.

Organizations always need managers, but they don't always need leaders. Managers are not necessarily poor leaders, and leaders are not necessarily good managers. Both roles are important, but they differ within the life of an organization.

Most organizations are overmanaged and underled. That is certainly true of most public school systems that lean heavily toward administration and bureaucracy, making them difficult to change and improve when reform is needed. In light of the growing pressure for schools and districts to rise to the demands of 21st-century education, we certainly need more leaders within the ranks of district supervision.

## Organizations always need managers, but they don't always need leaders.

In my experience interacting with thousands of school principals, administrators, and teachers over the past decade, I've concluded that two groups are overseeing our schools: "educators" and "teachers." Educators lean more toward leading in that they seem to be open to new ideas and are willing to give innovators time in their busy schedules to hear about breakthroughs; teachers are content experts in the areas they know, but they are not always interested in learning new things. The irony is that many school websites state, "Our goal is to develop life-long learners," yet their staffs don't emulate that goal. We reproduce what we are. Because many administrative staff members come from the teacher ranks, it makes sense that so many of them struggle to catalyze change; they lack the heart and head of leaders (educators).

Finding people who are good at both leading and managing is difficult, since they often work from different sides of the brain. Therefore, leaders are most effective when they

team up with managerial people with whom they can work in terms of attitude and disposition. When there's an emotional intelligence gap between those colleagues, everyone suffers. Some organizations succeed in spite of those inadequacies, yet we should not confuse organizational health with quantitative successes. As the saying goes, "Even a broken clock is right twice a day."

### Leadership and Influence

My former mentor, leadership guru John Maxwell, says, "Leadership is influence." That is true. But all influence is not leadership. If you look at a continuum of influence, leadership is but one portion of a large number of types of influence. An individual who never interacts with anyone but comes up with a great song, book, software program, or invention, can certainly influence society. Smart and talented people can influence us without making any organizational decisions.

When my sons were kids, we'd be out for a drive, and they'd say, "Let's eat at McDonald's." My wife and I weren't fans of the golden arches, but even though the steering wheel was firmly in my hands, we'd often find ourselves ordering Happy Meals in the drive-through.

Savvy leaders understand that different people in the organization have different types of influence.

I was the leader, but they influenced me. So if we call every type of influence leadership, we dilute it to the point where it lacks any significant meaning.

Although we've talked about the differences between managers and leaders thus far, few things in life are black and white, so let's look at the continuum of supervision. Savvy leaders understand that different people in the organization have different types of influence, and they know what is needed in what context and find the right people to get the job done. By understanding the variety of "hats" within the realm of supervision, they can have a clearer idea of who on staff may be best suited to address a need at hand.

Here are five types of leadership positions on the supervision continuum:

**1. Entrepreneur.** Entrepreneurs are creative and come up with new ideas of their own or enjoy acting on someone else's. Entrepreneurs love getting things going from scratch, charting new territories, and making paths where none exist. To be successful, entrepreneurs must quickly bring in people with managerial strengths, or else the organization will rise but fall quickly for lack of infrastructure.

**2. Transformational leader.** Transformational leaders like taking risks and going after significant changes, often in large steps. The



goal is to catalyze significant improvements in an existing organization, as opposed to beginning from zero (entrepreneur). People who wear this hat are often brought in when an organization is in a crisis and needs a turnaround.

**3. Transactional leader.** Transactional leaders pursue change in smaller steps, tweaking processes with the clear goal of making improvements. Having vision, seeing the big picture, and taking risks are still in this person's wheelhouse. Transactional leaders are often called upon when an organization is stalled.

**4. Manager.** Managers are more about keeping things going, perpetuating the status quo, or making small improvements. Managers focus more on *how* than on *what*; they are more methodical in their thinking.

**5. Administrator.** Administrators appreciate a strong sense of order, uphold the rules, and hold people accountable. They create systems, understanding that without order there's liable to be a big mess (or even jail time), and perceive new and untried ideas as dangerous and worrisome.

At the end of the day, what you call a person isn't nearly as important as what that person actually does. Titles and role descriptions often have more to do with

organizational culture, ego, and traditions than actions. But how people think and behave is important to understanding what to expect from them and the unique role they play on the team.

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What you do and do not get from various executive team members is based on whether they're behaving like an entrepreneur, transformational leader, transactional leader, manager, or administrator. By identifying what is needed when, we can serve our districts more effectively. Realizing that the label "leader" does not fit everyone in charge can make a big difference in how you interact with each other and how your organization functions.

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