Leadership from the Middle

Dr. Kathleen E. Allen
Allen and Associates
Keallen1@charter.net
www.kathleenallen.net

One of the things about the leadership research and writings that has frustrated me is the selection of whom they study (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Burns, 1987; Levinson & Rosenthal, 1984). The implication while not always stated, is that in order to transmit vision or to transform followers one must be at the top of an organization. This is implied regardless of the authors statements to the contrary because it may unconsciously be easier to attribute effectiveness as starting at the top of an organization and emanating downward (Pfeffer, 1984).

There is a set of background assumptions that creep into the association of leadership with top political or executive positions. One assumption is that leadership is scarce due to our inability to identify very many Iacoccas at the top of our organizations. Another assumption is that it is difficult to conceive of real intended societal change (the true test of leadership) unless one is already in a formal position and can draw from position as well as influence power resources to effect change (Burns, 1978). The concept of followers also gets confused when one thinks of leaders who are at the top of organizations. Followers seem to take on the guise of employees or constituents of organizational or political leaders in the unconscious mind of the readers.

I believe that the research connection of leadership with top political or organizational positions makes it difficult for students of leadership to understand the application of transformational leadership from an non-executive position. This paper is written to explore how leadership can occur in middle management positions. It will use concepts like vision, followership, power resources, and mutual wants and needs and explore how transforming leadership can come out of the middle of an organization instead of the top (Burns, 1978). It will also show how these concepts need to be adjusted in order to be implemented from a non-executive position.

I define a non-executive position as a person who is a department head, not a vice president, and one who only has limited access to the president of the organization. I will attempt to show how this individual can

be a transforming leader from the middle of an organization without the benefit of the natural and formal resources of an organizational president.

Followers

When one thinks of followers, one usually thinks of people who come or go after the leader. This often leads to an unconscious assumption that followers are below the leader. If one leads from the middle of an organization, this definition of followers has to be adjusted. Leaders from the middle need to think of followers as residing anywhere in the organization regardless of position. Therefore, one's boss, peers, or employees could be a follower.

This might come as a shock because one's boss has legitimate, reward, and coercive poser bases over one (Yukl, 1981). This puts a whole new light on not satisfying the wants and needs of a follower who also happens to be one's boss! But this is not discussed in the literature because the people who have been studies don't have to deal with this paradox because they happen to be at the top. This causes a less complex understanding of mobilizing followers who are also employees because of the unstated association of influencing strategies with legitimate authority.

In order to be a transforming leader from the middle, one must redefine where followers are positioned within an organization. This redefinition increases the importance of engagement with followers and the necessity of mutuality of wants and needs between leaders and followers. This redefinition also gives a new perspective of the damage a follower could cause a leader if the leader did not work form a mutual respect and mutual need basis. Finally it reinforces the concept of the free choice that followers have in regards to the leader. When one is leading one's boss, or boss's boss, the follower is not passive or unskilled. Leadership from alongside makes a lot more sense (Kinsman, 1986; Nicoll, 1986).

Vision

The question is . . . How can a leader who is in a position of middle management form and articulate a vision for a whole organization? I believe that the work vision often is used as if it has gravity attached to it. When researchers only study leaders, who articulate and transmit their vision from the top of an organization, it reinforces the concept that vision emanates

from the top and is sold to the rest of the organization (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). This makes it easy to forget the mutuality involved in developing a vision. When a leader generates a vision from the middle this mutuality can not be forgotten, because the vision is created and transmitted through the interaction with many people throughout the organization.

I believe that there are ways that a leader from the middle can initiate a vision for the whole organization. For example, the leader may sense an issue or a set of wants and needs of other employees that are not being met. This sensing process comes form empathy, insight, and a knowledge and experience base in the organization. The leader uses this information to form a vision that is generated out of the intuitive and unverbalized wants of others and one's own values. If a leader from the middle wants to generate a vision, it has to be connected to the mutual wants and needs of others. In order for it to catch fire with the followers it has to be based in the wellspring of want (Burns, 1978).

It is important to remember that the followers we are talking about include bosses, peers, and employees who are supervised by others as well as one's self. If the leader form the middle can sense an unmet need in all of these people, then articulate it with an intensity that will capture the attention of others, the vision will catch fire (Bennis & Nanus 1985).

The middle leader becomes the initial voice of the vision, but the spread of the vision depends on the development of a leadership team to spread and articulate this vision to others up, down, and laterally through the organization. The vision captures the commitment of people and through a grass roots movement it spreads to the entire organization.

Often vision is associated with the generation of symbols, rituals, and myths within an organization because they reinforce the meaning of a vision (Bolman & Deal, 1984). A leader from the middle can be just as effective at generating symbols as a top executive. For example the individual can suggest rituals to one's boss that can become a reinforcement of the vision. In staff meetings the leader can help others learn how to articulate the vision, generate meaning for their work, and verbalize how every day responsibilities are linked to the vision. The leader can also confront behavior that is not aligned and initiate double looped learning so that others become more conscious of the cause and effect of their actions (Argysis, 1979; Schein, 1985).

Power Resources

One of the things that a leader from the middle lacks is access to the natural power resources that come from the position of president. The middle leader becomes the true embodiment of leadership as influence. This leader builds followers up and down the organization from his or her ability to influence. This means that the leader from the middle needs to develop political skills, management skills, and personal power in order to maximize his or her ability to influence.

Politically, the individual needs to be able to assess where power resides within the organization and develop coalitions (Cohen & March, 1984; Wildavsky, 1964). In addition this middle leader needs to be comfortable with generating and being involved with conflict which will be an even more natural outcome when one influences from the middle (Burns, 1978).

Expert power base is increased when an individual is perceived as skilled and knowledgeable in his or her job (Yukl, 1981). This means that a leader from the middle has to have well developed management skills. Unlike the leader from the top of an organization, the leader from the middle needs to be an effective skilled manager. These management skills that are necessary to form an expert power base. Therefore, management skills become a prerequisite.

Referent power is generated form feelings of rapport, affection, loyalty, admiration from others. The individual with referent power shows consideration, trustworthiness, and respect to others (Yukl, 1981). I believe that these traits come form a personal alignment between what Burn's (1978) calls modal and end values.

Personal and professional respect increases one's ability to influence. In order to be respected, a leader from the middle needs to create a sense of personal power that extends beyond referent power. This personal power produces one's most important influencing resource (Hagber, 1984). I believe that this personal power comes from an integration of one's values and actions. It's a type of personal alignment that others can recognize and trust. It is this trust that allows a follower to freely choose to be influenced.

This need for alignment means that a leader form the middle needs to model the modal values as well as the end values. There are no times periods when one can turn off one's modeling; it would decrease one's ability to influence. Therefore leadership is an extension of one's values which have to be totally integrated into one's actions.

This alignment demands a second level of awareness form the leader as well. The leader from the middle needs to be more aware of how his or her actions are aligned with end values, and how to correct for

inconsistencies. This means that a leader from the middle needs to be constantly growing and learning.

The Downside Risk

The concept of being a transforming leader can be alluring and create a motivating purpose for an individual. However, when one demonstrates transforming leadership from the middle, one must be aware of the downside risk of choosing this path. First of all one's transforming leadership will be initiated in an arena of conflict and competition. This won't be from other team leaders and followers, because they will become part of one's coalition due to the similarities of end values. However, the competition will come from other people, who want power, see another vision, see another way to achieve the end values, or are just threatened by your ability to influence.

Because the leader from the middle isn't protected by the position power of a top executive, he or she needs to realize that one's boss and peers etc. can make life very difficult if they feel threatened by your actions, This is the downside risk!

Summary

Burns (1978) suggests that if one is aligned with universal end values, one can become part of a connecting link of individuals who transform people. As this group of people increase they in turn will eventually create real intended change in society. I believe that there are many individuals in middle level positions in organizations who subscribe to these universal values and are transforming themselves and others.

The purpose of this paper is to show how leadership can be generated from the middle of an organization and hopefully give others a clearer picture of how one might go about accomplishing this. I believe that there are nuances of difference between a transforming leader who operates form the top of an organization and one who operates from the middle. My hope is that this paper will encourage more individuals to attempt leadership from the middle of their organizations by representing how the concepts from the literature can be translated into practice by a person who is not an executive.

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