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“Leader”, or “Effective Leader” – Learning to Get Out Of The Way

by AJ Powell 0 Comments 11 min read



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President Ronald Reagan ushered in a new age for the United States with his sweeping transformational economic and geopolitical changes. His vision for his presidency was simple, make government smaller, fight communism, and restore American pride. After he became President of the United States, he announced his policy, then he found the right people to help him and he got out of the way. President Reagan once stated, “Surround yourself with the best people you can find, delegate authority, and don’t interfere as long as the policy you’ve decided upon is being carried out.” (Fortune, 1986). What these words did was emphasize to everyone around him that he was a leader, not a manager – he had people for that.

We can all name off at least a few great inspirational leaders throughout history, both modern as well as ancient, but just how many of those were actually effective at leadership, and how many were simply just leaders who made a few remembered decisions? Long before President Ronald Reagan became president, back when he was still an actor, another influential leader made similar comments. General George S. Patton once told his men, "Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity." (Patton, 1947). Not only was it surprising to hear words such as these come from a man who had a reputation as a brilliant war tactician that went looking for a fight himself, but they carried with them a keen insight into the brilliance of effective leadership. In fact, two key lessons – insights into the secrets of leadership if you will – can be drawn out from both President Reagan's and General Patton's words:

First, do not be a micromanager.



being the president, or everything about his nation and its internal workings. However, he did know that there existed confident, competent individuals who were motivated and professional, who could fill in those gaps. And that is exactly why the cabinet, and all other positions in the government exist. While no one man could ever hope to do it all, many hands make light work. President Reagan needed only to do two things, lay out his expectations, and then see that they were followed through with. Leadership is about providing purpose, direction, and motivation, and both President Reagan and General Patton were able to do these things effectively. They understood the value of teamwork, and that they could not do it all by themselves. They knew they needed help, but also knew that if they needed to tell that help how to do the job, they might as well have done it themselves. Essentially, part of being a leader is knowing when to get out of the way.



Micromanaging is not leadership, and if you find that you feel the need to micromanage an individual, they probably do not need to be there or doing that particular job or task in the first place. At the same time, a very competent and skilled worker may fall in performance or fail at a task simply because leaders are constantly in their AO (Area of Operations).

Second, let people do their jobs.

This means to get out of the way, to trust that individuals will be responsible enough to complete what needs to be accomplished, and that they will follow your orders, your guidelines, your vision. Of course this does not mean to avoid conducting follow-up's, or check on progress – which is responsible – but it does mean not to tell others how to do the task, to let them do it and come back when it is complete or if they have a problem along the way.

Pres. Reagan knew these lessons well. He understood that he did not know everything about

While it is perfectly reasonable to expect that a person could be good at one side or the other – being a leader, or being a manager – being good at both is often a rarer sight. The real question then is, sure, you can be a leader without necessarily being a good manager, but then just how effective as a leader are you? Being effective is different from just “being”, and this is the hardest part to establish out of the whole equation. During WWI, the British fired off tens of thousands of ordinance for every single yard of progress they made across the battlefields. During one movement alone, in a single battle they lost over 400,000 lives. 60,000 of which were in the first hour of engagement! Just how effective was the military strategy for this? How effective was the leadership? Rating “Effectiveness” is not all about results, but showing some figures sure can be an eye opener.

Being a leader, and not a manager, is a good thing, but being an effective leader is on a whole different level. Those who are good at both sides of the coin would rightfully so be considered better, and reasonably so be considered more effective. Yet this is not a certainty. Let us say that we have a leader who is equally good at managerial skills, yet micromanages his team... then what? Now how would you rate his effectiveness? Let us look at some modern leaders to see how this actually applies.

General Colin Powell has been called an exceptionally gifted leader. Throughout his military career, General Powell stated that he focused on just a couple of very simple things. (Powell, 2009)

1: Have a clear sense of purpose. This means to have goals, have a mission. As a leader, it is your job to convey to the organization that purpose. “What are we here for? What do we do, not just for money, but to make the organization better, to make a better society?”

2: Take care of the troops. This means to put your organization, your team, your subordinates, before yourself. Take care of your followers, train them, coach them, mentor and guide them. Give them the skills they need because they are the ones getting the job done. Be it knowledge, tools, or equipment, whatever it is they require to get the job done, if you are a real leader, you will make sure they get it. Otherwise, they will be unprepared and unable to succeed.

3. Commend people and yet do not shy away from discipline. Give people credit where credit is do, and this is more than promotions and awards. Sometimes simply telling someone just how much they mean to the team goes the farthest and means the most. At the same time, never shy away from maintaining discipline. Do not be afraid to fire people who refuse to work or improve, people who are discipline problems, and those who hold others back. The good followers know who the bad followers are and they are waiting for you to do something about it.

4. It is all about human connections. Leadership is about conveying to followers that you believe in them, you are going to support them, and that we are all in this together.

These four simple ideas became the hallmark of his leadership style, and one of the many reasons why General Powell was once considered to join the ranks of General Grant, General Sherman, General MacArthur, General Eisenhower and even General Bradley as a 5 Star General – General of the Army. After his retirement from the U.S. Army, General Powell was so influential as a leader, that he was favored as a potential presidential candidate. In truth, if he would have actually ran for the office, there is zero doubt the United States would have seen him as it’s first black president. General Powell stated that “The role of a leader is to put people – human beings – in the best possible environment to achieve the purpose of the organization you are a part of.” It is clear that even modern leaders like General Powell knew the importance



of getting out of the way. Yet it is equally clear that he understood that to be an effective leader, he needed effective management skills.



On the opposite side of the spectrum, just how effective of a leader was Steve Jobs exactly? After his death, media the world over seemed to announce just how great he was, and there is no doubt that he was able to build one of the best brands on the planet. Sure, he was capable at creating vision, and equally so, was good at steering the company, but was he effective as a leader? Despite all the praise and all the media attention, the answer is “No”. He was not an effective leader because he constantly clashed with his teams. He got his way because he owned the company (and eventually just “controlled” it as the CEO), but he was noted to be terrible to work for because he never let those who were hired to do a specific job, do their jobs, without him getting in the way. In the end, Apple was successful because of two things. One, a world-wide population of sheeple (people who follow the trends, are incapable of thinking for themselves, or have to do

what everyone else does), and two, because of the tireless efforts of the company who shelled out billions of dollars fighting legal battles to protect the brand and to forcefully maintain full control of the product even long after the consumer purchased it and attempted to customize it. If it were not for those two end items, Apple as a brand might very well have been ran into the ground due to ineffective leadership at the helm.

The bottom line is that we need to make a decision. Are we leaders, or are we managers? Just because someone is a manager, in no way means they are a leader, or that they are capable of leadership. On the other hand, just because someone is a leader, in no way means that they are effective at leadership. In the end, we can choose to simply be leaders, or we can decide to be effective at leadership. The two are not the same, and often it is us ourselves that prevent effective leadership from happening. Often we are too controlling, we micromanage, we get in the way. As leaders, we are ultimately responsible for the success of the organization, yes, but trying to control every facet of that organization is not leadership, it’s management. If we are to be leaders, we need to let people do the jobs they were hired to do, hold them accountable, and praise them for their ingenuity. After all... if we need to tell others how to do the job, we might as well be doing it ourselves.

SOUND OFF!

What are **YOUR** thoughts?

Take a few moments to think about your own leadership style. In all honesty, given just a few recent experiences, can you say that your own leadership is “effective” as it sits right now? Can you think of a few positive events that have occurred in the recent past that were a direct result of your leadership? How about a few negative events that might have occurred in the recent past that were a result of your leadership? In either case, were those events a mere fluke? Or was the positive the result of your leadership *being* effective, and maybe the negative a fluke (we all make mistakes from time to time)?

Finally, think about at least one other person who you know is a good leader who is effective at leadership, and one other person who you know is a good leader, but their leadership perhaps isn’t actually effective. What is it about the first person that makes their leadership effective? What can the second person do to make their leadership effective?

Take just a few moments to consider these questions, then let us know **YOUR** thoughts in the **comments below**! Open discussion helps everyone learn and grow.

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About the author



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AJ is a retired U.S. Army NCO who served in both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army. He is a combat veteran, and has participated in contingency operations around the world. AJ is the Owner of Veteran Leadership Solutions, the Founder and Editor in Chief of The Warfighter Journal, and is a published Sociological Analyst, Researcher, Guest Lecturer, and Public Speaker. He is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University with a focus on Sociology and a science degree in Organizational Leadership, and is published in the field of sociology. AJ is an inductive analyst; public figure; researcher/writer; aviator; a certified advanced operational diver; professional instructor, trainer, mentor, and adviser; snowboarder; motorcycle rider; world traveler; he enjoys long distance endurance events, and much more.