



The Browning Leadership Institute

Leadership vs. Management At the Senior Level

The prevailing wisdom is that “managers value stability, order, and efficiency, and they are impersonal, risk adverse and focused on short-term results . . . [while leaders] value flexibility, innovation, and adaptation: they care about people as well as economic outcomes, and they have a longer-term perspective with regard to objectives and strategies.”¹

Most authors of management books or textbooks view “leading” as part of management. However, this is a contested area. Many scholars and practitioners consider leaders entirely separate, with different goals and skill sets.

Harvard Professor John Kotter distinguishes leadership from management in this way: “Management is about coping with complexity. . . Good management brings a degree of order and consistency to key dimensions like the quality and profitability of products. . . . Leadership, in contrast, is about coping with change . . . more change always demands more leadership.”²

Some authorities assert that the discussion of the differences between leadership and management adds no real value. They argue that serving as a “senior manager” or a “senior leader” requires competency in both areas to be successful, especially at the apex of an organization (be it business, government, military, or nonprofit).

For example, Henry Mintzberg points out, “It has become fashionable to distinguish leaders from managers. One does the right things, copes with change; the other does things right, copes with complexity.” He further states, “Frankly, I don’t understand what this distinction means in the everyday life of organizations. Sure, we can separate leading and managing conceptually. But can we separate them in practice? Or, more to the point, should we even try?”³

Mintzberg argues that managing is ahead of leadership. “Leadership cannot simply delegate management; instead of distinguishing managers from leaders, we should be seeing managers as leaders, and leadership as management practiced well.”⁴

Gary Yukl states, “Strong management alone can create a bureaucracy without a purpose, but strong leadership alone can create change that is impractical. To be effective, managers must also be leaders, and leaders must manage.”⁵ He chooses to use the terms *leader*, *manager*, and *boss* interchangeably.⁶

The most popular distinction between leadership and management, as referred to by Mintzberg, is the statement: “Managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do the right thing.”⁷

When I was Director of the Navy’s worldwide Command Excellence and Leader Development in the early 1990s, I added an additional “right” to the leadership statement: “Leaders are people who do the right thing at the right time.” Whenever and wherever leadership and management are practiced, the timing of a

specific action or decision can be critical to either success or failure based on the situation and the context at the moment.

For example, President Abraham Lincoln's thinking and decision regarding the Emancipation Proclamation are illustrative. Would the Union cause be helped or hindered by issuing the proclamation?

Doris Kearns Goodwin posited, "All his life, Lincoln had exhibited an exceptionally sensitive grasp of the limits set by public opinion. As a politician, he had an intuitive sense of when to hold fast, when to wait, and when to lead."

Quoting Lincoln, she wrote: "It is my conviction . . . that, had the proclamation been issued even six months earlier than it was, public sentiment would not have sustained it." In other words, the North would not fight to end slavery, but it would and did fight to preserve the Union. Lincoln knew this and realized that any assault on slavery would have to await a change in public attitudes.⁸

For the purposes of the *Buzz-Saw Strategic Leadership Model*, I argue that there is a distinct difference between leadership and management. Leaders can only lead people; they cannot lead materials and time, for example.

Yet, leaders can manage strategies and plans; allocate resources—materials, money, time, people, etc.; establish organizational structure and alignment; and decide upon networks, technology, systems, and processes. For example, managing people can include recruiting, processing, assigning work, training technical skills, developing leaders, and providing recognition (rewards) and benefits.

Being well-versed and proficient in both strategic leadership and strategic management is essential for any senior-level leader's success. For the purposes of the Buzz-Saw Model, in contrast to Mintzberg's contention, strategic management is a subset of strategic leadership.

End Notes

- ¹ Gary Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations, Seventh Edition* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2010), 7.
- ² John Kotter, “What Leaders Really Do,” *Harvard Business Review* (May-June 1990), 104.
- ³ Henry Mintzberg, *Managing* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2009), 8.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ⁵ Gary Yukl and Richard Lepsinger, *Flexible Leadership* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 10.
- ⁶ Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations*, 9.
- ⁷ Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge* (New York: HarperCollins, 1985), 21.
- ⁸ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 501.