

THE 7 LIES OF LIMITING LEADERSHIP

by Ian A Williams

Too many people fall short of their potential in the leadership game, and also fail to enable or enhance the leadership of others. Ian Williams provides an interesting insight into some of the barriers to great leadership. In this issue, Ian shares with us his belief about some of the common lies about leadership, and in the next issue we follow this up with his account of the seven truths.



My passion for good leadership often leads me to observe and reflect on what happens in the workplace for individuals and teams. I listen out for comments and frustrations, and have concluded that there are some common misunderstandings about leadership issues, which I have summarised as the seven lies of leadership.

1. I'm not a leader

The person who thinks they are not a leader is in denial, and has missed the point about leadership. Everyone is leading someone - whether or not they know it, recognise it or want it. Even if we are on the same level, we lead our colleagues in some respects. We may lead projects, team tasks, or even a staff outing! We also lead our children and others among our families and friends. At the very least, we leave ourselves - or at least we should! Our only limit on personal leadership is what we put in place for ourselves, or how we allow others to limit us.

2. They (or I) have been trained

The magic land of training is where organisations send people for a few days, and expect them to come back as leaders. A whole host of courses and events, or any kind of qualification, doesn't make a leader. Training and development will inspire people, inform them, give them practice, provide experiential learning, build confidence, build competence and skills - but all of this will not produce a leader. Too often I go into organisations, and they struggle to understand why their trained leaders are not leading effectively, despite the huge investment made. No human being can be fully trained in leadership, because it comes from within, and needs to be drawn out by line managers and others who are willing to coach people and give them the space to lead. As part of one-to-one coaching, they build experience and confidence and nurture the leader.

3. There's a personality clash

This is one of the most wonderful leadership cop outs. While personalities do clash to some extent, and 'problem people' do exist, the challenge is to deal with it, rather than use it as an excuse for effective leadership. Leaders are accountable for their own relationships, and the relationships around them. They need to rise to that challenge and find strategies for having people work together. Too much time and money is wasted in avoidance, and in living with the consequences of poor relationships. Get people focused back on the goals, find specific reasons to their difficulties, and facilitate finding and implementing the solutions. If necessary get some help, but making work, rather than listen to excuses.

4. They won't step up

This is often the concern of senior managers who feel that either their people will not step up to lead, or that they fail to step up to strategic leadership from operational. The key to this one is identifying the blocks. Is it a question of won't or can't? Are they willing? Are they capable? Are they confident? In my experience the 'won't' part of this question is the lie. If the block is about skills, abilities, and/or confidence, it falls back on the senior leader to coach. Sometimes, it's a case of making clear to people what you see as strategic versus operational. Ironically, the most common cause for people not stepping up is senior people holding them down. They too often hold on to strategic issues for themselves, tell people what the decision is, and then wonder why everyone is frustrated! If you want to grow strategic leaders, involve them in strategic leadership.

5. Not a people person

How does anyone walk the earth and deny being a people person. People are everywhere, and we can't avoid them. And if we want to get anywhere with anyone, getting along with people isn't a luxury but a necessity. So unless you're a hermit, or you're in denial of your leadership role, you have to get on with people. You have to employ others who do this too. If someone is described as not a people person, they need to be given the feedback and required to do something about it, in order to lead themselves and other people. The key here is identifying the specific behaviour that causes the person to think this of themselves, or for it to be attributed to them. Then they need to do some self coaching will be coached. There are three aspects to balanced leadership: task, team and individual. If the leader is not a people person, they are missing two-thirds of their job; so in fact, they are not a leader but a person who just does jobs.

6. It's not my style

We read about and experience all sorts of leadership styles. There is no right or wrong, they are just different. Any leadership style becomes inappropriate if it is used in the wrong way, in the wrong circumstances, or at the wrong time. That is of course the essence of situational leadership. An effective leader is able to use a range of styles appropriately. They fool

themselves, and everyone else suffers, when they are attached to one favourite style, come what may. You will have met the constant bully, the habitual delegator, and the absentee. Adopting just one style is simply me centred, and the leader has to listen, learn and adjust if they are to motivate people and achieve tasks. They need to model a range of styles, so that others are learning from how they operate practically. After all, what is at stake if you have a leader who is not leading effectively?

7. Know it all, done it all

We've all met the magic leaders who have made it! We had better sit and listen to them, and sit back while they either do it themselves or give the orders! Who are they fooling with this lie? Individuals and teams are always different. Situations, resources, tasks and circumstances are always different. No season is the same; there is no constancy but there is always change. We all bring our experience and knowledge, we bring the benefit of wisdom, but we still need a refreshing quantity and quality of ideas, and the excitement of discovering something new together. It's this sense of contribution to creativity and synergy that keeps people engaged. No one has the monopoly on knowledge, wisdom, ideas and solutions. The know-it-all leader is living a lie and fools no one but themselves. Don't stand for their robbery.

I hope that some of these resonate with your own experience, and that you have found some ways to overcome the lies, and to stand up for the truths. Let's stop kidding ourselves with all the hype about leadership, and get some of the simple things sorted out for ourselves and those we influence!

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