What is 'Leadership'?

Results from a career development survey conducted by Calleam Consulting Ltd and the University of British Columbia (UBC) Sauder School of Business – Continuing Business Studies (CBS) unit

Synopsis – A survey of 400 mid-career professionals revealed that a full 100% were able to identify situations in which they had witnessed ineffectual leadership. Demonstrating the difficulty organizations face in developing leadership capabilities, the survey data suggests that superficial understandings of what leadership is lies at the heart of the problem.

A survey conducted by Calleam Consulting and UBC Sauder Continuing Business Studies (CBS) reveals a stark reality. When four hundred mid-career professionals were asked about their work experiences, a full 100% were able to identify situations in which they had worked for (or closely witnessed) leaders whose lack of leadership skills had a significant impact on the team's performance*1.

From a business perspective those impacts can be a significant burden. Leadership roles are 'magnifier roles' in which the actions (or inaction) of the leader doesn't just impact the leader's own work, those actions can impede the work of the team as a whole. Negative impacts may include reduced productivity, suppression of innovation, ongoing confusion and a host of other ripple effects that hamper business outcomes and dampen team morale.

Sometimes the impacts are immediate and apparent. Other times things accumulate over time. Rising levels of frustration, a slow decline in standards and growing stakeholder dissatisfaction build incrementally. At times that slow brew can boil over and valuable talent quits. A 2019 survey conducted on behalf of recruitment agency Robert Half Talent Solutions found that 39% of working professionals in Canada had quit a job because of their boss*2. As they say: "people don't quit jobs, they quit bosses".

There are, of course, a myriad of reasons why leadership problems are so widespread. One issue however is that people often advance from technical roles into team leadership roles without being given the guidance needed to succeed. Being a technical person in a team is a very different role from being the 'team leader', but often people go through that fundamen-

tal career transition without any formal training, mentorship or guidance. In such cases the newly minted leader has new responsibilities (which no one has fully explained to them) and are required to leverage a broad range of new skills (that no one has ever taught them).

The lucky few make the transition without help. They have an innate sense of what to do and were born with the required skills. The vast majority of people aren't as lucky and have to build their skills as they go. Some may get some degree of support, but a surprising number are left to learn from the so called 'school of hard-knocks'. The stark findings of the CBS and Robert Half surveys hint at how often that happens and illustrate that the 'school of hard-knocks' delivers disappointing results despite having the highest 'tuition fees' in the world.

Because of the broad portfolio of skills needed to lead effectively, developing leadership talent will always be a challenge. However, the starting point for doing so lies in defining what leadership is. That may sound like a relatively simple step but if you ask, you'll soon find you're facing a wide range of opinions and understandings.

That lack of consensus is easily demonstrated. Pick up a pile of resumes and you don't have to look far to find people who claim to have 'good leadership' skills. Interview those candidates and ask them "what is a leader" or "what is leadership" and many will struggle to answer in a succinct or coherent form.

Some will reply with very generic responses: "A leader is a person who leads a team". Granted interviews put people under pressure, but such an answer doesn't demonstrate much insight! More often, candidates will evade the ques-

tion itself and instead list the characteristics of a good leader (e.g. they are good communicators, they are inspiring). While those characteristics are important, respondents who focus on characteristics are sidestepping the question: "What is leadership?" Candidates who struggle on such questions are signaling a superficial understanding and with that, their chances of landing the new job starts to fade.

One reason people struggle to articulate what leadership is, is because leadership is contextual in nature. What it looks like in one context may be completely different from what it looks like in another. Sometimes leadership means taking charge and leading from the front. Other times (and perhaps more often) it means being an enabler who works in the background to create the environment within which others can succeed.

Adding to the confusion is the fact that leadership is often subtle and nuanced. So much so that moments in which a person provided critical leadership sometimes goes by without people fully registering what happened: Asking the right question at just the right time, interjecting into a straying conversation, encouraging a person just when they needed it or proposing how to solve a problem may in themselves be moments of leadership. Such moments are however fleeting in nature and although they may end up being pivotal to the outcomes achieved, the fact that a person provided 'leadership' sometimes slips by unnoticed. Compounding the issues is the reality that people sometimes see bosses they personally 'like' as being effective leaders, without questioning if the person really was being effective 'as a leader'.

The above realities mean that leadership seems to defy a simple, consistent and meaningful definition that works for all contexts. That 'void of definition' is then the source of ambiguity that invites individuals to make their own assumptions about what leadership is, how to do it and what effective leadership looks like. The CBS survey helps demonstrate the wide range of answers individuals come up with and the reality that not all of those answers are serving their organizations or teams well.

One way to untangle the knots and overcome the ambiguity is to step back and look at things through a value centric lens. To do that we need to reframe the question. Instead of asking "what is leadership?" We need to ask "How do effective leaders add value to their organizations?"

Answering that question requires us to carefully observe the daily interactions within a team (or the organization as a whole). In doing so we need to look for moments in which a person had a notable 'positive influence' over events. That influence may be overt or delicate. It may be direct or indirect. Among other things it may impact decisions, team dynamics, how people think about an issue or the actions people take. Sometimes the connection between influence and events is immediate, other times the connection is more remote or cumulative over time.

Such observations require us to tune into the subtleties of human interaction and look for the underlying cause and effect relationships that drive events and outcomes. The results of such observations show that leaders 'add value' in a number of different ways. For the purposes of discussion those 'value adding' moments can be categorized into three basic forms of leadership.

Table 1.0 - Ways in which leaders 'add value'

Form	Value proposition	Core activities	Central skills
Thought leadership	Adding value through invention, the generation of ideas & breakthrough thinking.	Driving innovation & being creative. Using expertise to make decisions or propose ideas. Championing ideas & getting people to adopt those ideas.	Deep technical & product/service knowledge combined with creativity.
Team leadership	Adding value by bringing people together & creating the context within which a team can excel.	Organizing people & teams. Creating a positive work culture. Helping teams develop their capabilities. Focusing & aligning people. Maximizing productivity.	Strong interpersonal, communications & organizational skills.
Strategic leadership	Adding value by envisaging a future state & mapping out how best to achieve the associated goals & objectives.	Crafting vision, setting objectives & high-level planning. Aligning projects, initiatives & people with the desired outcomes. Building buy-in.	Broad situational awareness, business acumen & the ability to communicate a vision.

As Table 1.0 suggests rather than being a simple 'binary' in which a person is either a 'good' leader or 'not', leadership is better viewed as a 'ternary' in which there are three distinctly different ways in which a person can provide leadership. A rare few may have strengths in all three dimensions, but more often than not people excel in one way, but not in others. As such there are people who may be great leaders in one role, but struggle if assigned to a different type of leadership role.

The imposition of the simplistic binary view of leadership onto the three pillared reality leads to one of the common mistakes organizations make: the appointment of a person into a leadership role for which they are poorly suited (a square peg in a round hole). One classic example is the person who was a great 'thought leader' who finds themselves promoted into a 'team leader' role (despite the fact they might lack the interpersonal skills needed). Another is the team leader that has great interpersonal skills who moves up the ladder into a role that is more about strategy than people. The failure to recognize the nature of that promotion can result in the person focusing more on people management than strategic leadership. That omission leaves the organization with a 'leadership void' in which strategy is left fuzzy, foggy or simply adrift.

Square peg in a round hole isn't the only issue arising from superficial definitions of what leadership is. Input provided by the participants in the CBS survey point to another significant issue. This time the issue concerns those in 'team leadership' type roles and stems from the question: What is the team leader's actual role within the team?

Clearly team leaders are responsible for more than just delegating tasks, but exactly what are those additional responsibilities (and how should they be discharged)? In some organizations the answer to that question is only loosely defined (if at all). Even in organizations with a more robust definition, the results of the CBS survey suggest that implementation of the 'team leader' role suffers significant inconsistencies. When asked to describe the behaviours of the ineffectual leaders they had worked with, participants reported a number of common 'patterns of dysfunction'. Among the strongest of those patterns were concerns about the way ineffectual team leaders interacted with the team. Some of the ineffectual leaders were micromanagers whose lack of trust alienated the team. Others were the polar opposite: team leaders who abdicated their responsibilities by failing to provide guidance or support even in situations where it was clearly needed.

In large part the problems outlined above owe their origins to ambiguity that surrounds what leadership 'is' and what the role of a 'leader' entails (and most commonly what the role of 'team leader' entails). That gap leaves individuals to define it for themselves and the results will of course then be a roll of the dice (a roll of the dice upon which an organization gambles its future). Sometimes organizations get lucky and the person assigned to a team leadership role is a natural (or figures things out on their own). Other times the dice comes up short and significant harm can be done.

To overcome that problem the 'Leading Professional Teams' (LPT) program offered through UBC Sauder School of Business – Continuing Business Studies unit recognizes the need for a well-defined 'mental model' that defines what leadership is. As a starting point for building that mental model, the class recognizes the three forms of leadership outlined in Table 1.0 and that each form adds value in its own way. From there the class defines a leader to be a 'catalyst of action'. A person who has the skills to influence and guide those around them as they work to help the organization (and all parties involved) maximize the value delivered.

For many, being plunged into a team leadership role without the necessary support can be a stressful experience. Even if you have a natural talent for leadership, it can still take time to find your feet. The LPT program has been designed to help people solidify their understandings of leadership and develop their skills needed to lead a team. Leveraging the practical experience of those who have been down that road (as well as original research into how effective team leaders 'think'), the class is an opportunity to gain insights, strengthen skills and develop the capabilities needed to fulfil the expectations organizations and teams have of their team leaders.

Leadership is perhaps the single most valuable skill you can have. It can advance your career, it can make your work fulfilling and it can help you achieve higher levels of income. Of value both professionally and personally, the investments you make in developing your leadership skills may well be the most valuable investments you make in your lives. Plus of course, given the uncertainty of the future you never know when you might be looking for a new job and the person conducting the interview asks you to articulate what is leadership.

Robert Goatham
Principal, Calleam Consulting Ltd
Program Advisor, CBS Project Management and Leadership Programs

References

*1 – Survey respondents were participants in the leadership classes offered by the UBC Sauder School of Business, Continuing Business Studies unit. Data collected – Oct 2019 to Jul 2021 through CBS online leadership classes. Demographics: 80% professional services + 20% technical and industrial artisans. All industries and broad cross section of organizational sizes. > 97% currently employed. Age range typically 25 to 50 with a mean of approximately 33.

*2 – Global staffing firm Robert Half Talent Solutions: Two in Five Workers in Canada Have Quit Due to a Bad Boss (https://www.roberthalf.ca/en/two-in-five-workers-in-canada-have-quit-due-to-a-bad-boss-survey-reveals) - Retrieved 20 Dec 2022.