

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES - THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE HUBRIS

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In leadership, the practical application of the concepts, principles and best practices is still subject to the particularities of the human nature, with its good and bad sides. The aim of this article is to outline a few of the best (and worst) features a manager/ boss/ supervisor/ commander may exhibit, in the attempt to provide an answer to the difficult question of what means a good leader, by exploring the various facets of the difference between the leader, boss, manager and supervisor and what are some of the negative implications on leadership of personality traits such as ego. The methodology used is based on interviews and a questionnaire applied to officers and civilians working in defense and national security area.

Key words: leadership; pitfalls; leader; boss; manager; effectiveness.

1. INTRODUCTION

The subject of leadership is a core topic in human capital management, supported by a significant number of theoretical and empirical studies. At the same time, the practical application of the leadership concepts, principles and best practices is still subject to the particularities of the human nature, with its good and bad sides. The aim of this article is to outline a few of the best (and worst) features a manager/ boss/ supervisor/ commander may exhibit, in the attempt to provide an answer to the difficult question of what means a good leader.

The literature offers many definitions of leadership. The process of leadership involves a specific type of responsibility, geared towards the achievement of particular ends, by using the available resources (human and material) and ensuring a cohesive and coherent organization in the process [1]. Other authors [2] [3] define leadership as a process through which a person influences a group of people to achieve a common goal.

An important issue related to the expression “good leader” derives from the ambiguity and subjectivity of the term “good”. From the point

of view of the team members, a good leader is a leader who is accepted, respected, followed and even loved by his team. From the point of view of the hierarchical superiors, a “good” leader may be the equivalent of an “effective” leader – that is the person that “gets things done”, the one who achieves the short term mission and the objectives, even at great costs in terms of human capital (burn-out, toxic workplace relations, high turnover, low morale). From a systemic point of view, a good leader may be the one focused on the achievement of both short term and long term missions and objectives, ensuring the survival and development of the organization, through a wise and humane use of the organization’s resources, especially of the human capital.

This complexity derives from the complex nature of leadership:

- a process that should be driven by the needs of the organization (the achievement of the organizational goals and objectives, with an effective use of resources);

- at the same time, leadership is an inter-personal process, a relationship between the leader and the members of the team, influenced by the personality traits and of the leader and the team members, the leadership skills of the leader (expressed as behaviors and decisions) and the nature of the activity.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the various facets of what makes a good versus a bad leader, the difference between the leader, boss, manager and supervisor and what are some of the negative implications on leadership of personality traits such as ego.

The methodology used is based on interviews and a questionnaire applied to officers and civilians working in defense and national security area.

2. LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES – THE GOOD AND THE BAD

The starting point of leadership derives from the following question: what is the reason, the final objective of the leaders’ actions? The most obvious answer would be that a leader aims to achieve the mission/ the organizational objectives by enabling, encouraging and coordinating his/her team on that path.

The principles of leadership are well known and identified throughout the literature. The ones highlighted below, although by no means exhaustive, present the view of the United States Army [4], which identifies eleven basic principles of leadership:

- A leader should be technically proficient
- Should develop a sense of responsibility in his/her team

- Communication is crucial to ensuring that tasks are understood, supervised, and accomplished.

- Empathy and interest in the people's well being

- Continuous self-improvement

- The importance of seeking responsibility and taking responsibility for own actions.

- Setting the example

The purpose for highlighting just a few of the many leadership principles identified in the literature is to provide a starting point for the main findings of this article, in relation to some of the leadership challenges.

Setting a personal example is a key leadership principle, in both civilian and military organizations. A good leader shares the hardships with his team, regardless of the nature of the hardships. The keyword is "team", as depending on the personality of the leader, sometimes there is the tendency to assume that the leader should have a special status (leaving earlier although the team is required to work long hours, getting special privileges – anything from coffee up to central parking space or special tableware). The main task of an effective leader (that is one that inspires the team to follow him/her to reach the organization objectives) is to function as an enabler of the talents, skills, abilities, knowledge and energy of the team members to be harnessed towards the common goal.

In here lies the crucial difference between leader, manager, supervisor and boss.

A *boss* can be defined as "an individual who is in charge of people inside an organization, exercising control over employees, who gives orders, assigns tasks and duties to them, and is entitled to make decisions on some matters"[5]. The boss is either the owner of company/organization or the person assigned by the major shareholders/top management/command to be the person in charge of the respective organizational component, and he/she may be a commanding officer/NCO, manager, supervisor, director, chief.

The *leader* can be defined as "an individual who possesses the ability to influence and inspire others towards the accomplishment of goals. He/she is someone who holds a dominant position and leads others by example. He/she has a vision, stays committed to their goals and strives continuously towards achieving it. He/she sets an example in such a way that people get motivated and want to follow in his/her footsteps or directions".[6]

A *manager* usually focuses on more significant issues and decisions, related to the purpose, goals, functions and roles of the organization, providing the link between the organization and its external environment (larger

organization, other institutions, stakeholders etc). A *supervisor's* role is more limited to the boundaries of the organization, with the focus of ensuring the implementation of the manager's decisions through the activities of the employees.

In the issue of leadership challenges, especially in the military organizations, understanding these differences becomes crucial for the effective performance of the tasks and missions.

When the commanding officer or NCO is perceived as the "boss", this is a sign of how the team members view their job, the respective commanding officer/NCO and their place in the organization. Even though the military is a strict hierarchical organization, the subordinated personnel should not feel as they work principally for the boss – perceived as the person which pays their salaries and has a discretionary power over their career, revenues and even personal lives. There is a huge difference of perspective between considering the personnel as "employees" (disposable, interchangeable, that have to be controlled and used) compared to "followers" (team members with unique abilities, that have to be inspired, attracted, motivated and whose respect and trust has to be gained by actions and behavior, not through authority and fear).

Promoting an organizational culture in which the personnel feels as they are mere subordinates to a boss can have serious negative impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of the organization. A major issue is that it reduces the vision regarding the goals and objectives to be achieved to "pleasing" the boss or avoiding his/her displeasure. The organizational goals and objectives will take second place and even in the cases where the boss sincerely wishes to achieve the organization's objectives, the employees are likely to lose touch with the "bigger picture".

The distinction between boss and leader is of great importance for the effectiveness of an organization, as the reality shows that "competent leaders make up only a minority of people in positions of authority who can engage and develop followers, build teams, and achieve results that improve organizations, societies, or countries" [7].

The distinction made above between manager and supervisor does not mean they cannot be leaders, regardless of the level of decision and power they are at in the organization. The challenge derives from the fact that being a competent leader is a lot more difficult than being a boss, as it requires more than being assigned to a position and given the formal authority and instruments of power. Being a good leader requires a complex mix of intrinsic qualities,

education, practical experience and a lot of work of improvement and self-discovery. It is easier for those in authority to remain “boss”.

Another challenge for an effective leader is to understand the importance of the organization memory and knowledge, the need to preserve and draw upon it, to make the difference between useful organizational memory and useless “tradition”. The organizational memory is an “explicit, immaterial and persistent representation of knowledge and information within the organization”[8], that provides the framework for “the keeping of reasoning, behaviors and knowledge, even contradictory and in all their diversity” [9]. The organizational memory is comprised of formal documents, regulations, instructions, processes, but also the informal connections with other persons / organizations, the organizational culture, the knowledge about the organizational customs, courtesies, group values, spirit, intent, the past events, the lessons identified and the lessons learned. It can be found in written documents, but also in the memory of the organization’s members. Ignoring the organizational memory leads to the need to rediscover problems and solutions that were already tackled before, the loss of support from internal and external stakeholders. It is like

suffering of amnesia for a person, which has to learn to walk, talk, and write – in a word function, over and over again.

By contrast, the organization’s “tradition” provides little value to the organization, as it does not contribute to the achievement of the purpose. The “tradition” of constantly making belittling comments about women at informal events, of “hazing” the newcomers or at least discriminating them, of having oversized yearly anniversaries of the institution that consume more time and resources than activities directly linked with the organization’s purpose, with the sole purpose of promoting the personality of the boss, are classic examples. But useless or outdated organizational traditions that can negatively impact efficiency derive also from the appearance within the organization of competing informal groups, of avoiding the identification and recording of lessons learned in a written process. Another example of harmful tradition is allowing the concentration of knowledge and information about specific activities only in one person (usually a person that has been with the organization for a long time) and keeping everybody else (especially junior members or newcomers) in the dark, with the consequence that when that person leaves the organization, all that knowledge will be lost.

3. LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES – THE HUBRIS

Since leaders are human beings, sometimes the answer to the question in the previous section (what is the reason, final objective of the leaders' actions?) is not as easy and straightforward, as personal considerations (expressed here for the purpose of brevity as hubris) may take precedence over the organizational considerations.

The authority and position of power conferred to a manager/commander, combined with specific personality traits and a lack of organizational checks and balances can provide the breeding ground for a “boss” whose behaviors, actions and decisions will be led mainly by his hubris (extreme or excessive pride or dangerous overconfidence, often in combination with arrogance [10]) and not by fulfilling the organizational missions and goals.

The danger of developing the so called “God syndrome” (the tendency to view oneself as irreplaceable, of always being right, of overstating one's abilities, knowledge and importance in the organization, of being automatically worthy of respect and obedience) is quite high in this circumstances.

One of the pitfalls of letting the hubris lead is related to the tendency of a specific type of “boss” to confuse authority with expertise, in the sense

that “the boss knows best”. Greater executive decision making authority should make the person in charge more receptive to the subject matter expertise, not less. A good leader is realistic enough that he/she cannot possibly know everything, and nor should he/she be the smartest, more knowledgeable or more educated person in the organization. This is why subject matter experts, advisors and personnel with experience in various areas should exist in an organization. The job of an effective leader is to ask for the right information to be provided, to prioritize and create a cohesive whole out of the information, not to provide the information itself. A “boss” who insists on contradicting the experts, disregarding their advice and taking decisions independently is likely to have a negative impact on the functioning of the organization. A good leader starts from identifying what he/she doesn't know, as making decisions without knowledge and information, or even worse, against knowledge, by ignoring evidence, facts, expert advice, lessons learned can become a huge drawback for the organization. The sense of “irreplaceability”, if not held under control by strict organizational checks and balances, can lead to impulsive and harmful decisions, but also to the tendency of treating the organization as a personal turf. When

the boss's positions seems threatened (by decisions from superiors or by external factors outside his/her control) the boss's hubris may lead to an attitude of "after me, the deluge", with behaviors ranging from intentional inaction and lack of or delaying important decisions, up to malevolent actions and sabotage against the organization.

Another reason for avoiding hiring or promoting people that are perceived to be more intelligent, more knowledgeable or more professional than the "boss" is the fear of competition and replacement. The "boss's" hubris does not exclude the subconscious feeling of insecurity and inadequacy, making him/she more prone to surround himself/herself with people perceived to be inferior or weaker, who may have the added "advantage" of stimulating the good self-image of the person in charge through flattery and sycophancy. While this situation may be advantageous for the boss, it is extremely disadvantageous for the organization, as it leads to loss of talent (the professional personnel will have the tendency to leave the organization), but also through the breaching of one of the main principles of effective leadership, the need for mentoring and training a suitable replacement. In this case, the disappearance of the "boss"

(regardless of the cause - promotion, resignation, natural causes) may have serious short term consequences on the organization, which do not end with the appointment of a new person in charge. The latter will face the difficult task of managing/commanding the organization without the support of professional personnel, without the connections built overtime, without relevant information regarding many of the processes in the organization that were strictly controlled by the previous boss.

The aspect of training/mentoring a successor is also closely related to the issue of delegation. Delegation of authority and responsibility can be highly beneficial for the effectiveness of the organization, as leaders are made (identified, educated, trained, exposed to learning situations). At the same time, delegation of authority is beneficial for development of the personnel, as it exposes them to the challenges of leadership gradually, in a controlled environment, allowing them to gain crucial experience and confidence about their abilities, while at the same time relieving the leader of some of the less essential tasks.

An open communication (within the boundaries of the organization's rules about classified information and need to know) is

another hallmark of an effective leader as opposed to a boss, as it impacts not only the present (by allowing people to do a better job when knowing the relevant information and context), but also the future. Providing the relevant personnel details on how and why things are done is a good way to train the people who might one day be in a leader's position and who should understand why things work/don't work, are done/aren't done.

The "boss" will have the tendency to micromanage, accumulate all authority and decision making power, sometimes delegating tasks and responsibilities, but never the authority. Assigning responsibility without authority is not the best way of promoting organizational effectiveness, as it creates the conditions for failure, assigning blame and encouraging lack of initiative and confidence in the personnel. An additional negative side effect of over-controlling and not delegating authority is the creation of unnecessary tensions between the various members of the organization, as fulfilling the assigned task will be exclusively the personal responsibility of that person, depending on his personal relations with the colleagues, who have the possibility to choose if they may or may not support him/her in

the fulfillment of the assigned task. The employee can only "ask nicely", not knowing if they can depend or not on the proper organizational processes, information and channels.

This is another crucial difference between a boss and a leader: a boss will always be self-oriented and profit oriented, while the leader is people oriented, which does not necessarily exclude mission oriented or the self-interest. A leader can be very effective in achieving his/her mission, in fulfilling the organizational objectives, while at the same time considering his/her present and future interest and career. The main difference between an effective leader and a boss is that for the leader, one of the motivating factors is that he/she considers the personnel under his/her authority as team members, that have to be motivated to follow him/her. The leader is aware that the welfare of the personnel is crucial for the effective functioning of the team, the achievement of the mission/objectives and eventually for the development of the leader's career. A leader does not consider empathy and kindness weaknesses, while at the same time encouraging professional behavior and proficiency, by not tolerating toxic behaviors, lack of implication and slacking. A leader is motivated by gaining the trust and respect of the personnel, while

the boss considers the personnel as “subordinates”, mere “human resources” or “tools” to be used (and sometimes abused) for his personal interest and promotion.

In the attempt to exercise his/her control over the organization, “the boss” often uses tactics such as “divide and conquer”, by emphasizing and actively encouraging the divisions within the organization. For the boss to exercise control, a very effective tool is to create “the bad other”, by encouraging the common prejudices (such as racism, sexism or ageism), but also organizational specific differences of any kind (civilians vs military, operations versus administration, officers vs NCO’s, active versus retired, blue collar vs white collar). Any pretext is good for creating divisions, distrust, for identifying “the other” as the culprit, in order to enhance the level of control from the boss and to avoid unconformable questions regarding the actual effectiveness of the activity, but also for the benefit of his/her hubris, as the puppet master that controls everybody’s behavior, doling out rewards and benefits.

4. CONCLUSIONS

One question that arises from this paper is the following: can “being a boss” really be considered

as a leadership style, or is it that an unfortunate combination of personality traits and organization-specific conditions allow its appearance. Some bosses genuinely do not realize their destructive impact on the morale of the team, while others may even be very effective in achieving the organizational objectives, but usually only on short term, as on medium and long term the destructive effects of their approach to leading will significantly impact the human capital. Authority structures (formal and/or informal) play an important role in any organization, the more so in the military organization. Still, the most effective leaders realize that leadership is a privilege, not a reward, a due nor a destination on the career path.

The person in charge is given the formal authority over a group of people and has the power to significantly impact their professional and even personal development and lives. As such, leadership comes with huge human responsibilities, not only with institutional responsibility. Consequently, a good leader is one who is constantly working on improving his/her leadership, professional and personal skills, but also his/her character. The purpose should be to improve the effectiveness of his/her activity and to further the interests and values of

the organization, but also in order to set a good example for the people he/she is leading, who will be more invested in improving themselves and furthering the group goals if they see equal effort from the top. The phrase “do as I say, not as I do” should have no place in leadership.

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