

The careerist: ‘Leaders are influencers and persuaders’

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Published: November 12 2010 23:00 | Last updated: November 12 2010 23:00

A mistake executives often make is thinking that being a leader and being a manager are the same thing. But while there are similarities, they are quite distinct.

What is the difference between managing and leading?

There is often a great deal of overlap and most management roles do have a leadership element; the trick is to combine the two successfully. However, the higher you climb, the greater the leadership element gets.

Jane Clarke of Nicholson McBride, the business psychologists, says that many people fail to understand this relationship. “Management tends to be quite hands-on, while leaders need to reach a wider group and articulate a vision and strategy. A lot of it is bigger picture stuff rather than doing more of what made you a successful manager.”

In fact, where many leaders go wrong is that they spend too much time managing. “Management is ensuring everyone gets their budgets done on time. Leadership is raising everyone’s performance by 5 per cent,” says Helen Pitcher, chairman of IDDAS, a boardroom effectiveness consultancy.

Is there a template for leadership?

The only model is to be authentic, explains Ms Pitcher. “You need to be clear about what you are as a person and what your values are,” she says.

When many people replace successful leaders, they often try to be like the person they have replaced. “But research shows there are thousands of leadership traits, so there is no one right kind of leader,” she adds.

Is leadership just high-level stuff?

“You need to stay up on the balcony where you can see what’s happening on the dance floor, rather than being on the dance floor,” says Virginia Merritt, a partner at Stanton Marris, a strategy consultancy.

Leading also has a far stronger political element than managing. However, she adds: “You need to deal with the emotional stuff as well. You have to tune into the mood of people and connect with them. Leaders are influencers and persuaders. It’s a fine balancing act.”

Here, says Ms Clarke, “a little self-disclosure can be very helpful. You need to have gravitas and presence, but you need to talk about your feelings.”

What unpleasant duties does a leader have?

“You must be able to give tough love,” says Ms Pitcher. “Be prepared to have those conversations. As a leader you get the behaviour you accept. If one of your team is underperforming, what are you doing that allows them to get away with that?”

What about leadership teams?

The temptation, says Ms Clarke, “is to recruit in your own image and you should avoid that”.

Ms Merritt adds: “You need to surround yourself with the right people, including people who will tell you you’re wrong and people who may be better than you in some areas. It’s very easy to get in a bubble.”

Leaders are also likely to have strong, deep networks that allow them to exert influence informally.