By David Elrod, CMA, CPA

The Leader Within

Not all managers are leaders, and leaders don't have to be managers. To be a leader means you build respect within your team, provide an example for others to follow, and enable your team to succeed.

One of my fellow IMA® Leadership Academy faculty members posed a question recently in the faculty LinkUp IMA forum about the difference between a manager and a leader. Several other members in the forum made some good points that exemplify the differences. The two aren't necessarily mutually exclusive: Not all managers are leaders, and you don't need to be a manager to be a leader.

On the other hand, all managers should strive to be leaders if they want to get the most from their teams. The manager title simply provides a platform to demonstrate leadership, but it doesn't give the person the gravitas befitting a leader. For that, managers have to acquire some basic skills to lay the foundation for leadership and set up their team for success. Leaders build respect within their team, provide the example for others to follow, and enable their teams to succeed. Without these basic foundational elements, success will be elusive.

Build Respect

A highly functioning team with a great leader simply works, but it works well because the leader ensures that everyone is respected. People who feel respected aren't afraid to make bold suggestions to improve a situation. They also can tackle difficult problems on their own without fear of failure. Organizations that lack this base level of respect ultimately fail because most members of the organization are more concerned with preserving their own reputation than they are with helping the group succeed.

I once took a role where the relationship with the business partners was strained and frayed. The business partners weren't sure they wanted the Finance department engaged with their operation and were initially resistant to the Finance leadership role I had taken within their group. The situation was primed to be a textbook failure, but the leader—my manager in this case—set the tone for the interaction between my team and our business partners. She gave me the ultimate vote of confidence in how she respected me and my approach to this thorny problem.

After a few months of working with these business partners, I had gradually won them over through hard work and focus. Had I not had the respect of my leader, I may not have been successful because I would have been more concerned about the internal environment of our team than the problem at hand. Her respect provided the nurturing environment for me to succeed, and I passed down that same level of respect to my team, which only amplified our capabilities and success. By demonstrating such respect for me and the team, my manager transcended her title and became a true leader who in turn earned everyone's respect.

Lead By Example

Writers are often told to "show, not tell" when writing great stories, and the same holds true for leaders. Many managers are good at dictating instructions to their team, but if they want to be leaders, they shouldn't tell their team members what to do and how to act. Instead, they should show them. Nothing sets the stage for a high-performing team like great leaders who do what they say they're going to do and live by the values to which they hold their team.

I've worked with managers who were good at this and those who weren't, and the results really illus-

trated how important it is to lead by example. One of my former managers introduced himself to the team by talking about his values and what was important to him as a way of demonstrating what he would value most on our team. I was impressed by his willingness to be so open, but he also put his money where his mouth is and lived by those values every single day I worked for him. I became grounded in them and knew exactly how he'd respond to a given situation based on our first meeting. He was very consistent between what he said and what he did, and that inspired me to follow him and help him succeed.

On the other hand, I've also had experiences where leaders paid lip service to values or ideals but behaved very differently in closed audiences. This juxtaposition between the "public" face and the "private" one created all kinds of problems that called the leaders into question and ultimately led to the failure of their teams.

The fact is that the leader sets the tone for the organization and should lead how he or she expects the team to perform. Anything that suggests otherwise creates confusion and results in behaviors that won't lead the team to success. All leaders at lower levels in an organization reflect the values and behavior of the penultimate leader, which makes leading by example very important for managers seeking to become true leaders in their organizations.

Enable the Team

Often, leaders don't do the work as much as enable others to do their best work. A good leader hires great people and then gets out of their way for the most part. Yet even the best people will run into obstacles such as resource constraints and organizational rigidity that preclude them from achieving the best results. This is where a leader can really shine by removing or reducing the impact of the obstacles so that his or her team can succeed. Such enablement not only helps the team win, but it also engenders goodwill and builds the reputation of the leader.

One of the best managers I've ever had was a master enabler. She provided the general direction in which the team needed to go, and then she worked to remove obstacles as needed. I had many one-on-one meetings with her where I told her about a problem I was having, and she'd come back to me not long afterward with a potential solution or suggestions to help me work through the problem. She used her extensive network and her influence within the organization to help me get things done.

Because she was so good at enabling me and others on her team, I worked harder for her and enjoyed every minute of it. I wanted to make sure she got the benefit of my best efforts. Collectively, her team was successful because of her empowering attitude toward everyone who worked for her, and it made her a true leader whom everyone admired. My experience with working for her made me truly realize how important the role of enabler is to a leader, and I refocused my own leadership style to remove obstacles for my team, which yielded great results.

What It All Means

Not all managers are leaders, but all managers should strive to be leaders if they want to get the most out of their teams. There are many things a manager can do to become a leader, but a few basic skills are necessary if he or she wants to be a true leader. Respect is required for a team to function properly, so a leader should set the tone of respect and hold everyone accountable to it, including business partners. Managers need to lead by example: Leaders don't just tell people what to do but demonstrate how things should be done in the organization. Finally, managers need to enable their teams if they want to be seen as true leaders. Exemplary leaders remove obstacles and help their teams succeed. It isn't easy to become a leader, but with enough practice and effort, every manager can become one. **SF**

David Elrod, CMA, CPA, is a former finance director at Microsoft. He also is the Chair Emeritus of the IMA® Leadership Academy Advisory Committee and member of the IMA Greater Seattle Chapter. You can reach David at djelrod@hotmail.com.

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