

SOLVING PERFORMANCE CHALLENGES

LEADERSHIP MYTHS THAT WREAK HAVOC
ON WORKPLACE CULTURE:
AN EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

KARIMA MARIAMA-ARTHUR, ESQ.
Founder and CEO, WordSmithRapport



INTRODUCTION



Like any other culture, workplace culture is comprised of key factors that include a shared set of beliefs, customs, values, behavior, and goals. Periodically these factors must be evaluated to determine their impact on the organization. If unchecked, they have the potential to negatively impact employee morale, job performance and overall organizational success. Effective leadership is a fundamental driver of healthy workplace culture, whose impact can be measured both quantitatively and qualitatively. And because effective leadership is contextual, the relationship between leadership and workplace culture is both significant and symbiotic. Failure to appreciate the connection between the two can be costly for individuals and organizations alike.

A 2014 report published by Deloitte Human Capital Trends described effective leadership as “The No. 1 talent issue facing organizations around the world” (Canwell et al. 2014, 25). While shedding light on today’s global market environment and the need to adapt to the goals of 21st century leadership, the report also explained the need to “develop new leaders faster, globalize leadership programs, and build deeper bench strength” (Id at 26-30). But it’s not just lower level management and staff that stand to benefit from leadership development. More complex roles and responsibilities, such as those located at the top of an organization’s hierarchy also fuel this need. A research study published by the Harvard Business Review, identifies C-suite executives as prime candidates for leadership development, since at this level, leadership skills and business fundamentals matter more than technical and functional expertise (Groysberg et

al. 2011). “We’re beginning to see C-level executives who have more in common with their executive peers than they do with the people in the functions they run. And today members of senior management are expected not only to support the CEO on business strategies but also to offer their own insights and contribute to key decisions” (Id). Clearly, leadership gaps exist at all levels within an organization. Nevertheless, these gaps must be addressed to assure that individuals throughout an organization can competently and confidently perform their roles and contribute to long-term, strategic success.

But effective leadership isn’t the only issue affecting workplace culture. Myths about what leadership is and isn’t may be even more problematic. Further, because these myths are often perceived as being true, their potential to negatively influence stakeholder thinking, behavior, and ultimately spill over into the fiber of an organization itself is significant. In their most basic form, leadership myths are based on misconceptions about the role: how someone becomes a leader, skills leaders should possess, and how leadership status is maintained. At the macro level, these myths hinder the ability of organizations to develop leaders that can attain and maintain competitive advantages, ensure organizational longevity, and promote corporate viability. At the micro level, they affect job performance, prevent individuals from advancing their careers, and wreak havoc on workplace culture.

This paper highlights two of the most compelling leadership myths that deeply affect workplace culture.

LEADERS ARE BORN, NOT MADE

How does someone become a leader? Some argue nature (trait theory); others nurture (process theory). Recently, scholars have identified two critical aspects of leadership effectiveness, which help to clarify the debate. A 2013 study published by the American Psychological Association found that leaders often operate in dynamic and complex social environments that require them to possess strong perceptive and adaptive abilities in order to make good decisions and be effective (Hannah et al. 2013). Together, these abilities form the key components of what researchers have termed leadership complexity, “the process by which an individual achieves some degree of fit between his or her behaviors and the new work demands created by the novel and often ill-defined problems resulting from changing and uncertain work situations” Chan (2000, 4).

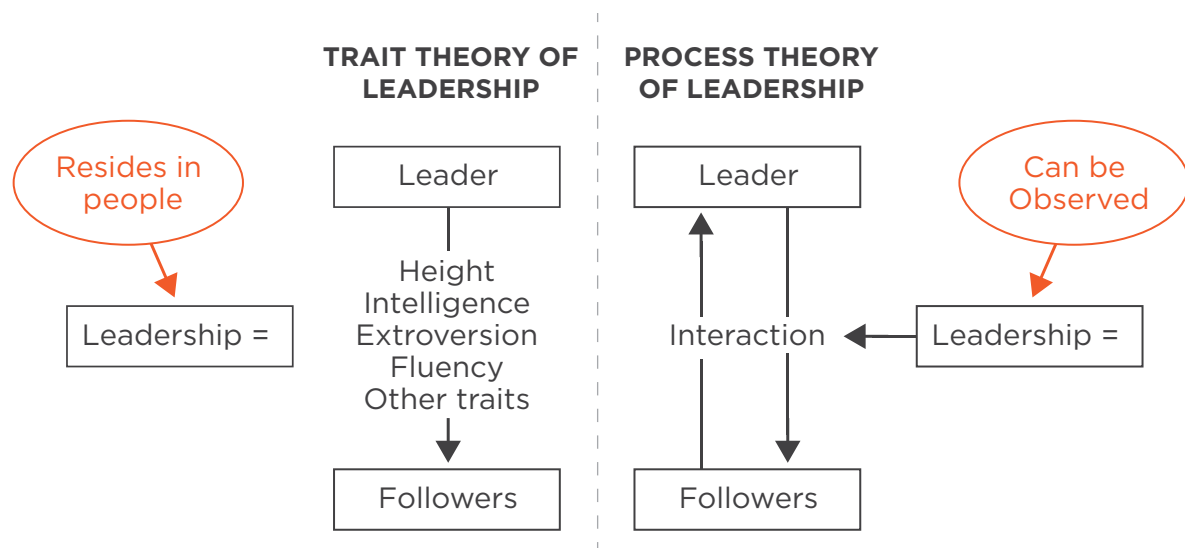


FIGURE 1. Fundamental differences between trait leadership theory (nature) and process leadership theory (nurture). Source: Northouse, 2007.

But here's the million-dollar question: Is leadership complexity limited by innate, inborn characteristics? Or can perceptive and adaptive abilities be developed contextually, through training and application in the process of actuating leadership? Stated differently, what is the greatest influence on leadership behavior: nature or nurture? Fortunately, even though intrinsic leadership traits may be important on some level, they do not determine leadership complexity or even leadership success. Scholars have long since debunked the archaic 'Great Man' leadership theory (Ricketts 2009, 2). Complex life experiences, development, and real-world application, are perhaps as critical to leadership success as anything else. In fact, scholars have argued that every leader has experienced a 'crucible' or an intense, transformative experience that has significantly impacted their thinking, behavior and ultimately, leadership success (Bennis and Thomas 2002, 4 and 14-17). Furthermore, perceptive and adaptive abilities are, by definition, honed in interactive environments, which is exactly why nature can only take you so far. Moreover, some of the most compelling criteria that influence long-term leadership success reflect those behaviors and abilities that have been developed over time through learning and transformative experiences, to include these (Id at 18-21, 90-91, 140 and 147):

1. an “adaptive capacity” that lets people not only survive inevitable setbacks, heartbreaks, and difficulties but also learn from them;
2. an ability to engage others through shared meaning or a common vision;
3. a distinctive and compelling voice that communicates one's conviction and desire to do the right thing; and
4. a sense of integrity that allows a leader to distinguish between good and evil.



... MANIFESTING AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP REQUIRES A ROBUST COMBINATION OF ELEMENTS THAT EXIST FAR BEYOND THOSE FOUND IN NATURE.



In the workplace, promotion of the trait leadership theory rewards individuals perceived as having intrinsic leadership characteristics with increased opportunities for growth and mobility. But for others, these opportunities are often few and far between. While individuals possessing intrinsic leadership characteristics may not necessarily outperform their peers in practice, the perception gives rise to a gateway of exclusive opportunities generally not presented to others. This creates an 'us' vs. 'them' dynamic, increasing the likelihood of conflict and resentment among co-workers. Alliances and cliques can easily develop following such rifts, frustrating progress and sabotaging an organization's ability to manage results. These kinds of divisive elements can taint workplace culture and eventually dismantle an organization from the inside out. Moreover, once the damage is done, it can be difficult to reverse.

To create a thriving leadership culture with increased chances for success and long-term survival, an organization must value and prioritize diversity in team composition and contributions, as well as present unqualified opportunities for development. Encouraging multi-directional communication

and collaboration amongst team members clearly enhances this result. By developing and maximizing synergies, boosting individual and organizational performance, an organization creates capacity for scalability and lays the foundation to achieve long-term, strategic goals. Even in a fast moving global economy, where organizations may prefer to hire individuals already equipped with leadership skills that can immediately be implemented, the truth is that some degree of development will always be necessary, since the tenets of leadership complexity require it. Moreover, studies show that organizations that invest in culture, leadership development, and other areas of human resources tend to flourish and enjoy greater long-term success (Wilson-Burns 2012).

While people may be born with specific traits that impact the way they negotiate the world, manifesting authentic leadership requires a robust combination of elements that exist far beyond those found in nature. By understanding how to develop and maximize perceptive and adaptive qualities, organizations can avoid marginalizing employees, build stronger leadership cultures and attain greater overall success.

MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP ARE THE SAME THING

Management and leadership are vital to the success of every organization regardless of size and complexity. They are complementary concepts, but hardly identical in purpose or function. However, because people often use the terms interchangeably, there is significant confusion about where the differences—if any—lie. But organizations, in particular, cannot afford to get this wrong. In the boardroom and beyond, the inability to appreciate key differences between management and leadership has facilitated incompetence, employee turnover, and financial loss in organizations the world over. Hence, understanding core differences can aid organizations in making better fundamental decisions, improving workplace culture, and achieving large-scale, competitive advantages.

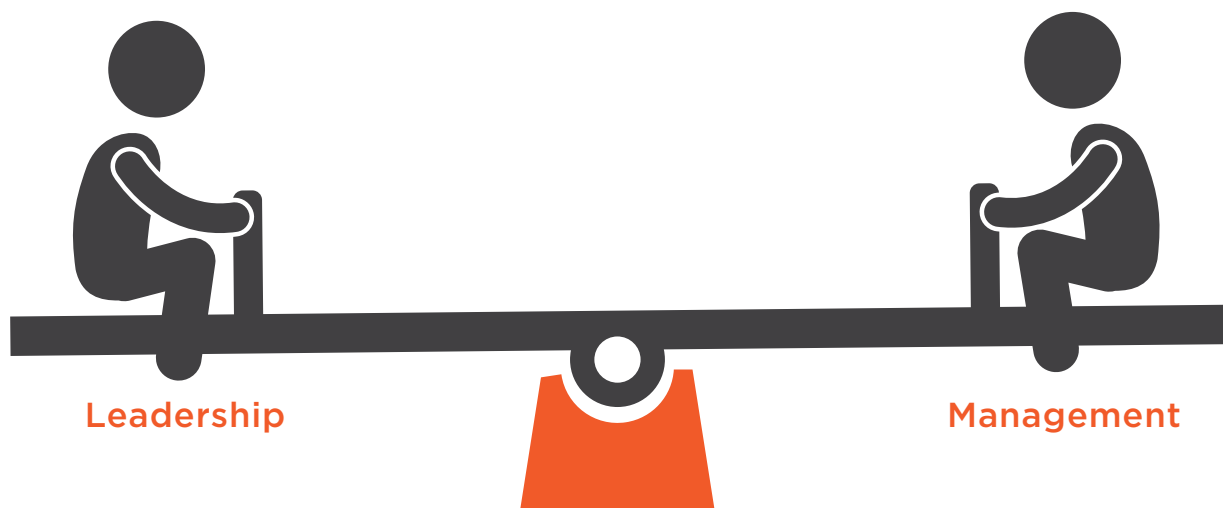


FIGURE 2. The complementary relationship between management and leadership.

MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP ARE ORIENTED DIFFERENTLY

Orientation plays a critical role in how each concept is navigated. Management is process-oriented and focuses on organizational and administrative undertakings such as planning, executing procedures, evaluating performance, problem solving, reaching benchmarks, and meeting deadlines as driver of success. It also involves directing an organization's resources to achieve efficiencies, as well as deploying specific assets to accomplish key objectives. The goal of management, through these kinds of processes and more, is to produce consistency and order that will lead to quantifiable results (Kotter 1990).

Leadership, on the other hand, is people-oriented and focuses on developing others by supporting their efforts to: 1) accomplish specific goals and 2) make forward progress in spite of perceived difficulties. In many cases, it may also mean challenging someone to step outside of their comfort zone in order to achieve results. A leader, who may exist anywhere within the organizational food chain, will create value, inspire performance, build relationships, and align synergies to escalate this outcome. This fundamental distinction, which is also perhaps the most salient, illustrates that facilitating success through influence is essentially the soul of leadership. For that reason, even someone working in the upper echelons of an organization (i.e. the leadership) may not necessarily be leading an organization at all.

DIFFERENT GUIDING PRINCIPLES PRODUCE RESULTS FOR LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT



The ability to achieve results is a measure of effectiveness examined throughout an organization. However, managers don't get very much say in how they do it. Generally they follow detailed guidelines—best practices—that assist them in executing their duties and maintaining the status quo. Moreover, because maintaining the status quo is an important measure of management success, using consistent methods to garner results is ideal. For this reason, institutional memory is a pervasive management concept: Management is systematically poised to implement the mandates envisioned by others, not author its own.

THE ABILITY TO ACHIEVE RESULTS
IS A MEASURE OF EFFECTIVENESS EXAMINED
THROUGHOUT AN ORGANIZATION.



Leadership, however, relies on more intuitive and analytical methods of thinking and doing to actuate results. Leaders will instinctively challenge the status quo as they pursue the best outcomes. This reflects the fact that leadership is a future-based, forward thinking concept and as a result, defying convention makes good sense. By taking calculated risks that lead to innovation and process improvements, leadership illuminates the big idea that change can be good, perhaps even life-or-death for organizations stuck in the muck and mire of enterprise gridlock. And for factors such as competitiveness, scalability and long-term survival, leadership offers a fresh perspective and new direction for the way forward.

EACH IS UNIQUELY ASSOCIATED WITH A CRITICAL OCCUPATIONAL SKILL SET

Hard skills, such as those captured in an academic setting, to include domain knowledge, scholarly and technical expertise, are the artifices of management. Examples include foreign language proficiency, highly technical expertise, industry-specific experience, and more. Certain subject matter experts such as a doctor, lawyer or accountant, fit squarely into this category based on the specialized academic knowledge and complex skill sets necessary to perform with competence. In their most basic form, these skills are transactional in nature and are used to determine professional competence. Management is fundamentally associated with hard skills because its purpose is to maintain the core business of an organization, which requires a keen focus on procuring and governing individuals with quantifiable skills sets that collaborate to produce results.

Soft skills, such as those interpersonal competencies developed organically, to include adaptive and perceptive abilities, are the artifices of leadership. They are often associated with emotional intelligence (Berger 2014). Because leadership is focused on developing people, it necessarily involves cultivating interpersonal skills—soft skills—at the highest level. Examples include communication, emotional regulation, resilience, relationship management, professionalism, self-assurance, integrity, social graces, and more. Soft skills, also considered core competencies, enable you to perform with excellence above and beyond the transactional components, or the four corners of your job description. The cornerstones of leadership—to foster development and drive performance—require an individual to create value and boost social acuity through the dynamic support systems uniquely embedded in soft skills.

THE PRINCIPAL FUNCTIONS OF MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP WILL ALWAYS BE NECESSARY COMPONENTS OF LONG-TERM SUCCESS.



In any organizational ecosystem, the principal functions of management and leadership will always be necessary components of long-term success. However, when organizations behave proactively and utilize these bright line distinctions to guide practical decision-making and effectively navigate leadership and management, their results will speak for themselves. Of course their workplace cultures will also reflect it.

SUMMARY

Effective leadership is critical to the long-term success for every organization around the globe. But myths about leadership can deeply impact workplace culture and easily impede an organization's capacity to realize long-term success. What we know for sure is that leaders are made and there are marked differences between management and leadership. Organizations that fail to proactively confront leadership myths increase the likelihood of confusion, frustration and the inability to bring key results into fruition. However, the power to create or reshape culture is well within the bounds of every organization. All it takes is the desire to effect change at the highest level.

How will you handle these and other leadership myths in your organization?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**HER WORK HAS BEEN FEATURED BY:
ENTREPRENEUR, SUCCESS, NBC NEWS, CHIEF
EXECUTIVE MAGAZINE, BUSINESS INSIDER,
BLACK ENTERPRISE, AND MORE.**



Karima Mariama-Arthur is the Founder and CEO of WordSmithRapport, an executive consulting firm specializing in professional development. She brings more than two decades of comprehensive, blue chip experience in law, business, and academia to the field of professional development. She works with corporations and their executive teams to solve performance challenges in the areas of communication and leadership. Her work has been featured by: Entrepreneur, Success, NBC News, Chief Executive Magazine, Business Insider, Black Enterprise, and more.

A leading authority in cutting-edge adult education, Karima is distinguished by her commitment to excellence and extraordinary talent for elevating executive brands. As an expert facilitator, executive communications consultant, and strategic leadership advisor, she trains, coaches, and consults individuals and organizations on the dynamics of complex communication and high performance leadership competence.

Karima is a Corporate Speaker, certified by the International Association of Corporate Speakers, a Professional Member of the National Speakers Association, an esteemed graduate of the Bill Gove Executive Speech Workshop, and a Distinguished Toastmaster (DTM), United States Senate.

For more information about professional development training, visit www.wordsmithrapport.com or send a personal inquiry to consulting@wordsmithrapport.com.

REFERENCES

1. Bedwell, W., Fiore, S., & Salas, E. Developing the Future Workforce: An Approach for Integrating Interpersonal Skills into the MBA Classroom. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*: Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 171–186. 2014.
2. Berger, L. “The Hard Truth About the Current State of Soft Skills in the U.S.” Nov. 2014. *The Huffington Post*. Web. 30 Dec. 2014.
3. Bernard, B. 1985. *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations*. New York: The Free Press.
4. Bennis, W., & Thomas, R. 2002. *Geeks & Geezer: How Era, Values, and Defining Moments Shape Leaders*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
5. Canwell, A., Dongrie, V., Neveras, N., & Stockton, H. (2014) *Leaders At All Levels: Closing the Gap Between Hype and Readiness*. Deloitte University Press: A Report by Deloitte Consulting and Bersin by Deloitte.
6. Chan, D. 2000. Understanding Adaptation to Changes In the Work Environment: Integrating Individual Difference and Learning Perspectives. *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management*, Vol. 18, pp. 1–42.
7. Groysberg, B., Kevin, K., & MacDonald B. “The New Path To the C-Suite.” Mar. 2011. *The Harvard Business Review*. 6 Dec. 2014.
8. Hannah, S., Balthazard, P., Waldman, D., Jennings, P., & Thatcher, R. 2013. The Psychological and Neurological Bases of Leader Self-Complexity and Effects on Adaptive Decision-Making. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 98, No. 3, 393–411.
9. Kotter, J. 1990. *A Force For Change: How Leadership Differs From Management*. New York: The Free Press.
10. Northouse, G. 2007. *Leadership Theory and Practice* (3rd ed.) Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
11. Quigley, N. 2013. A Longitudinal, Multilevel Study of Leadership Efficacy Development in MBA Teams. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, Vol. 12, No. 4, pp. 579-602. Retrieved from Business Source Alumni Edition Database.
12. Ricketts, K. 2009. *Say Hello to Leadership*. University of Kentucky College of Agriculture. ELK1-100.
13. Stephen, M., Vahdat, H., Walkinshaw, H., Walsh, B., Canwell, A., Dongrie, V.,... Volini, E. (2014). *Global Human Capital Trends: Engaging the 21st Century Workforce*. Deloitte University Press: A Report by Deloitte Consulting LLP and Bersin by Deloitte.
14. Wilson Burns, E., Smith, L., & Ulrich, D. 2012. Competency Models with Impact Research Findings from the Top Companies for Leaders. *People & Strategy*, Vol. 35, No. 3, pp. 16-60.