The Evolution of Leadership

Leadership styles have evolved over time, with a prominent shift from the autocratic and directive leadership of the twentieth century to a more participative and democratic style of the new generation. In a global study involving 389 leaders from 28 countries, The Centre for Creative Leadership (CCL) found that 83% of the leaders surveyed believe that the definition of effective leadership has changed in the past five years.

These changes to leadership styles can be attributed to a combination of issues including a shift in people’s attitudes as well as advances in technology. There is an imperative for leaders of organisations, including HR Managers, to plan ahead and adapt to the movement of these evolving trends to ensure the best outcomes for their organisations.

The move has shifted from Authoritarian leaders who believed in top-down management, strict rules and exact orders, to a progression into white collar careers with more individualised thinking and individual ownership over tasks. It was here that participative leadership styles settled in, and this style is now one of the most common leadership styles in contemporary society.

Changes in leadership styles can be seen across Asia-Pacific too as a Harvard Business School Professor explains that, “As Asian companies seek access to world capital markets, they will move toward professional managers who will employ leadership styles more akin to those now used in the United States.”

The participative style of leadership management is where the group is central to the decision making process, and not the leader alone. The work environment is more flexible and managers feel at ease in regards to drawing on the knowledge of experienced followers. Today’s leaders speak in terms of “open” dialogue and “collaboration,” and indeed if you ask the great leaders of today they will invariably point to their close collaborators and mentors as being part of the leadership.

Traits of Successful Leaders of Today

The shift from authoritative to participative styles

An appointment to a management role does not automatically equip an individual with successful leadership skills. In many situations people follow management because they have to, however the ideal scenario would be where people follow leaders because they want to. Ergo, an obvious trend has arisen whereby managers are seeking to develop leadership skills. This, combined with the acceptance of the participative leadership style is also resulting in workgroups developing into “teams” with an emphasis being placed on team leadership as being the top of the evolutionary cycle.

Within teams, it is important to ensure that there is a genuine desire for each team member’s input into the outcome; the caveat is that the leader must believe that the group members have definite value to add. This does not mean that every idea from every individual should be implemented, but paying lip service will not be an adequate response for the contemporary employee who can usually tell if there is a genuine desire to achieve buy-in.

In general, people do not like to have ideas or solutions imposed on them but if they have been part of designing the end game, they are more likely to have buy-in and an inclination to support and take action on decisions made by the leader.

In a study conducted by CCL-Asia, among the variety of events mentioned by respondents, the role of bosses and superiors was the most significant in making a lasting impact on their development. This was the most widely cited event, with 53% of all respondents citing a boss or superior as a source of learning about leadership.

The ability to manage expectations & priorities

One of the more contemporary and desirable traits of effective leaders is their ability to manage expectations. That includes managing the expectations of investors, shareholders, employees, suppliers, the community and other stakeholders; trying to deliver too much too soon often results in nothing being delivered particularly well.

In his book, “From Good to Great,” Jim Collins, a highly regarded author on leadership writes, “We’ve all been told that leaders make
things happen—and that’s true: But it is also true that good-to-great leaders distinguish themselves by their unyielding discipline to stop doing anything and everything that doesn’t fit tightly within their one big initiative.”

Effective leaders, of the past and present, carefully articulate what the end goal is and have a robust plan to get them there. Leaders understand that they are working with scarce resources – people and capital. Their imperative is to prioritise initiatives based on the impact and the ease of implementation and then allocate their resources appropriately.

“Under promise and over-deliver,” is an oft-quoted mantra. It may seem exceedingly obvious but it is infrequently put into practice. Some leaders want to appear as able to do everything, but sometimes strategy is choosing what not to do.

The Future of Leadership

CCL has found that the number one ranked skill in terms of importance for employees is leading people. 73% of respondents stated that leading people is important for success now, but an even greater percentage of 89% stated that it will be the most important factor for success in the future.

Due to vast technological advancements, an increasing trend in leadership styles called ‘Self-Leadership’ is now being seen more and more often. The pioneers of this leadership style mainly connect over the Internet, rather than through face-to-face interactions, and fully exploit technology to forge an innovative and creative path. They have the drive to disperse physically and geographically as they do not need to be managed and only ask for help when absolutely necessary. Statistics revealed by The Herman Group predict an increase by 40% of home-based work by the year 2020.

Using primarily networking and negotiation skills, these types of leaders focus on the bigger picture and coordinate directions taken by independent workers. In this new leadership setting, the less-technologically able leaders may feel challenged.

Learning and development resources remain indispensable to draw in different styles of leadership and outline various approaches to the new trend. Resources covering leadership topics include Online Learning Portals with live-scenario based training films on a broad spectrum of business challenges.

Tips for Leaders to Plan Ahead:

- Invest in leadership development programs for staff in management positions to adapt to emerging leadership trends.
- Motivate employees to keep learning and developing their skills so they can continue to contribute to new ideas and innovations.
- Focus on recruiting self-motivated individuals who have the potential to grow as leaders.
- Observe trends in developing leadership skills so that your organisation can position itself favourably for future success.
- Plan an organisational culture that fosters creativity, collaboration and innovation.