

How to Determine Your Personal Leadership Philosophy

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Take the needed time to thoughtfully answer some pertinent questions and begin to design the kind of leader you would like to be.

*One ship sails east and another sails west,
With the selfsame winds that blow;
'Tis the set of the sails and not the gales
That tells them where to go.*

*Like the winds of the sea are the winds of time,
As we journey along through life;
'Tis the set of the soul that determines the goal,
And not the calm or the strife.*

Ella Wheeler Wilcox, 1916 ¹

If our sails are set correctly, our personal leadership philosophy — not the gales we encounter every day — will tell us where to go.

To develop an effective leadership philosophy, we first need to look at what we mean by the term, “transformational leader.” No matter whether our title is leader or manager, we need to be transformational. A transformational leader is one who is capable of leading the organization from one paradigm to the next.

A paradigm is the way we think. The way we do things. The way we approach things. In health care today we need a new model. We need to think differently. We need to do things differently. We need a new paradigm. The paradigm of the past will not work in the future. Our leaders need to be able to lead us from the paradigm of the past to the paradigm of the future. Transformational leaders lead to the next paradigm.

For a transformational leader to be successful, three things are necessary:

1. The transformational leader must choose the correct next paradigm. It is clear to the transformational leader that something must change. The organization needs a new paradigm to thrive in the future. But what should that paradigm be?

In the 1980s, IBM was a mainframe computer company. IBM was also in trouble because, as urban commentator David Stein has pointed out, the “past was gone, and the present was full of confusion.” The leaders of IBM made the decision that the company needed to change paradigms, and needed to do it quickly. IBM decided to make laptops, and the Think Pad was born. It was a very successful move from the paradigm of the past to an effective paradigm for the future.

As leaders and managers, you must be alert to the symptoms of instability while the organization is between paradigms. Watch out for the little things. Stay focused on what you must do and take care of each other.

2. The transformational leader must motivate the organization to make the paradigm leap along with him or her. We all prefer things the way we are used to. Changing to a new paradigm is scary. Every organization will resist change. A transformational leader is able to motivate the organization to take a deep breath and make the big leap, believing that the new paradigm, chosen by its leaders, is the right thing to do and, in fact, is the only thing to do.

3. A transformational leader must inspire the organization to hold together while in the very dangerous transition phase between paradigms. We have left the security of doing things the way we did in the past. We have not yet settled into the new way to respond to the future. People get uncomfortable. Things can blow up. Life in the organization is not stable. People get emotional and tense. Actions or comments are easily misinterpreted. Flare-ups occur. Little things become big.

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If you are unsuccessful in making the transition between paradigms, it will be because you did not take care of each other. Leaders, managers and supervisors all play a key role in the transformation. Leaders cannot do it alone. Managers and supervisors make it happen.

Philosophical Moment

One of the most important things you can do to become effective leaders and managers is to think about, define and then articulate your own personal leadership philosophy. Here are three reasons why it can become the key to your effectiveness.

1. Your personal leadership philosophy gives you consistency. Without a leadership philosophy, your actions and your reactions will reflect the tensions of the moment. “We never know how he might respond or what she might say.” The reason is that the leader does not know what his or her leadership philosophy is. With a leadership philosophy that you know and understand, your actions and responses are filtered through your philosophy. They are in context. They are predictable. There is less fear of the unknown in the organization. Your philosophy gives you consistency.
2. Your leadership philosophy becomes your true north. Everything you do, everything you say, every action, every decision, every plan is filtered through your philosophy. Your philosophy becomes your rudder. It helps you to maintain the right direction. It keeps you from straying. It is your compass. It keeps you from losing effectiveness.
3. Your leadership philosophy will connect you to your work. Your philosophy is all about your own personal mission and who you are as a leader or manager. If you are not clear on your personal mission, your role as a leader will not be clear. If you are not clear yourself on who you are, the people you lead will not be clear on what you are about. Your personal leadership philosophy must incorporate your own personal mission. It must also incorporate who you are as a human being.

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But then, if your own personal mission is in sync with your organization’s mission, and who you are as a person is in sync with your organization’s values,

your leadership philosophy will connect you to your work. And very few things are more fulfilling in life than being connected.

It is important to understand that your leadership philosophy will be a work in progress. It will evolve as you mature as a leader. It will change as you study and think about leadership. You need to be thinking about your personal philosophy, you need to grapple with it, chew on it. If you cannot articulate your leadership philosophy, your goal should be to get started creating one.

First, you need to spend some time (months, not minutes) thinking about who you are and what you believe. Think about your relationship with those you lead. Think about how you get things done.

More accurately, for each of these, think not about who you are now or how you do things now, but rather who you want to be and what you want your relationship with your employees to be, and how you want to go about getting things done.

When you are creating your personal philosophy, it is not necessarily a description of who and what you are now, but rather an opportunity to design who and what you want to be as a leader. Then you can start moving in that direction.

Your leadership philosophy should be encompassing enough that it can be applied to every aspect of your daily activity as a leader. You should be able to filter every action, every decision, every response through your philosophy. You should be able to apply your philosophy to every issue, every problem and every opportunity.

For your philosophy to meet these criteria, it needs to consist of three essential components:

1. A philosophy is defined as a system of principles for guidance in practical affairs. This first and overarching component consists of a description of the basic principles that guide you in your practical affairs of leadership, principles upon which your actions, decisions and responses are based.

Principles are a guiding sense of the requirements and obligations of right conduct. They provide a personal and specific basis for conduct and/or

management. These principles derive from your values, from whom you want to be as a person, a leader and a mentor. These principles could be called your mental model.



A first step to developing a leadership philosophy is spending time thinking about who you are and what you believe. Think about your relationship with those you lead and about how you get things done.

You must have thought through and be able to clearly articulate the principles upon which your philosophy is based. Always be asking yourself the question, “Is this particular decision, this particular action, firmly rooted in my principles of leadership?”

2. Your leadership philosophy also should address the desired results or outcomes you are striving for as a leader. Here we are not talking about your annual objectives or particular projects or even the level in the organizational hierarchy that you hope to achieve. Rather, at a higher and more encompassing level, what do you, as a leader, hope to accomplish throughout your career as a result of your leadership. What drives your leadership activities? What is your personal mission for your career? The question then becomes, “Will this decision or action move my organization in the direction of my desired results?”

3. The third component is a description of what you envision your leadership style, your method of operation (M.O.) to be. Not necessarily what it is right now. It is a description of the process and approach that you would like to be using consistently, based upon your principles, to achieve the desired outcomes described in component two. Ask the question, “Will this process or approach move my people in the direction of my desired results?”

The Bottom Line

The bottom line regarding your personal leadership philosophy is: Will it enable you to consistently make the right decisions (principle-based), the right responses and the right actions for every issue, problem or opportunity that you encounter as a leader? If so, does it have transformative potential? Your leadership philosophy should be clear, concise and principle-based. It should have transformational potential.

Here are the kinds of questions you should be asking yourself as you think through your leadership philosophy:

- Can you define your critical principles and beliefs that impact your ability as a leader?
- What do you stand for that becomes important as a leader?
- How do you define your role in your organization?
- What are your goals? Not programmatic, but personal, as a leader.
- What is your personal leadership vision?

- As a leader, how can you contribute to transforming your organization?

Other questions to think about deal with your relationship to those you lead:

- How do you motivate your people?
- How do your people know how well they have done when they go home at night?
- How do you encourage your people?
- How do you affirm your people?
- How much autonomy do you give your people?
- Do you demonstrate respect and compassion toward your people every day?

The final questions have to do with your leadership style. How you do things:

- How do you approach problem solving?
- How do you approach conflict?
- How do you respond to employee mistakes?
- How do you prioritize your activities?
- How do you teach your people?

Take some time and begin to write out your real-world responses to each of these categories. Your responses need to be something that can get traction, not some pie-in-the-sky generality. You can begin to design the kind of leader you would like to be.

We began with Ella Wilcox's poem, which asserts that it is the set of the soul that decides the goal, and not the calm nor the strife. I am suggesting that for each of us as leaders and managers, it is the internal set of our own personal leadership philosophy that decides the goal, and not the day-to-day events that confront us.

I encourage you to take the development of your leadership philosophy very seriously. It is an important key to your personal effectiveness.

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