

**What is leadership anyway?**

*Leadership can never stop at words. Leaders must act, and they do so only in the context of their beliefs. Without action or principles, no one can become a leader.*

Max DePree, *Leadership Jazz*

Max DePree is the former president and CEO of Herman Miller Furniture in Zeeland, Michigan. The guiding principles and values that seeded the growth of the parent company are the same ones that are prevalent in the company today. It's common to find that the beliefs, values and norms of companies are the same ones that were present among the founding fathers. They get carried along year after year and become established as part of the "bone-deep" beliefs of the current culture.

The characteristics that we assign to a powerful leader are often traits that have been required in the past. They may no longer be sufficient to lead in the knowledge-based cultures of today. Fixed on a paradigm of known leadership traits, we continue to revere charisma, visibility, good public speaking, logical thinking, a strong sense of order and the ability to measure almost everything. But maybe we're measuring the wrong things. (See Chapter 1, "Are you measuring the right things?" for more on this.)

Change is the norm. When change is managed with human potential in mind, employees are motivated, trusting, creative, innovative and willing to take greater risks to improve quality. All of these skills are required as companies are driven to respond faster, cheaper, with fewer resources and higher quality—all to satisfy greater customer/client/consumer demands. These demands, of course, slow the search for an improved work environment.

This new dynamic demands a significant paradigm shift on the part of the leader. The role of the leader is to be in touch with the beliefs and values of the workforce and to begin by understanding himself. It is the beliefs and values of employees at all levels that allow for quality service and high levels of productivity. When a leader is really in touch with employees he can begin to mobilize employee enthusiasm and capabilities, and capitalize on the emerging business potential.

To make good and timely decisions, leaders need information from all levels of the organization. In most organizations, executive teams consistently receive information through the chain of command, successively filtered by each layer of management. As a result the leader is unable to hear the direct voice of his employees. A forum is required where employees can speak directly with executives about how senior-level decisions really impact quality. Does your company have a forum for this connection to take place?

When a forum for connection is in place, employees experience a meaningful and useful link with their senior team. The way employees are treated is directly linked to their own perception of being valued in the company. What they focus on expands. If they think they are valued, they work hard to provide value. The reverse is also true.

Let's look at fear for a moment. Whenever there is fear in a workplace, quality is at risk. If you are not sure about how fear sounds in your work environment, notice the following comments. All of these were spoken in a fear-based workplace.

- "I had better not say or do that again."
- "There is no way for me to win in this situation."
- "Here we go with more of the same, just packaged differently."
- "Doing this would be a career-limiting move."
- "My manager doesn't listen to our ideas."

In a highly innovative and trusting environment, these statements would sound different.

- "Things were different last month. Let's try this idea again."
- "No matter what we do, it is going to give us insight about the next steps."
- The company tried this before but the circumstances were different."
- "My boss is generally very supportive. He encourages us to try different things."
- "The result was disappointing but the intention and the effort were great. Let's see what we can achieve in this next phase!"

Collaboration is required, and much more. "What more?" you might ask. Have a look at those around you whom you consider to be highly effective and inspiring. Do they display the emerging leadership skills mentioned below? These skills are gentler yet more powerful in nature than the traditional leadership traits. These skills result from an environment of trust.

**Declaration—she declares where she stands..**

**Silence—he finds moments to be still.**

**Not knowing—she suspends her need to have answers.**

**Listening—he listens differently.**

**Intuition—she trusts her own intuition and the intuition of others.**

**Flexibility—he is flexible in his style.**

**Learning—she encourages individual responsibility for learning.**

**EXERCISES** - List the leadership skills that are rewarded in your company. Where are they stated? Are they part of the mission statement? Are they found in policy form? How do you know which leadership skills to practice in order to be recognized as a good leader?

How is leadership training/professional development handled in your organization? What do you do that represents less obvious leadership skills?