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Subordinates or Co-Leaders?

A prominent and well-respected leader once said to me, "I am furious about how this project has turned out. It is my own fault. I should have visited the site every other week to give them specific instructions, because that is the only way to create something great. You just cannot rely on others these days." He then went on to tell me how busy he was and why he wasn't able to devote as much personal attention to this important project as he needed to, and how much he regretted it now.

A few months after this conversation I started working with this company as a consultant to help them better align employees with the company's vision and mission. The company had aggressive targets and a bold vision, and needed everyone's full energy in order to achieve it. "I have a feeling that we are not getting 100% from all our people. Can you help us pinpoint the reasons?" he asked. A quick 360 survey and a week of random interviews and I had the answer. People were scared to make any decisions for fear of upsetting the big boss. Everything waited for the boss to decide and hence nothing was ever completed on time. The boss was the biggest bottleneck. While the pay and benefits were good, and it was generally a nice place to work, no one felt any ownership. People were satisfied, but not engaged.

Does this situation sound familiar? You can find similar scenarios all over the world. The greatest shortcoming of such organisations is that their success is limited to the extent of its leader's individual brilliance. If the leader is visionary and works really hard, the organisation succeeds accordingly. Amidst such success, it is impossible to say how much more success could be achieved. In good times, everyone applauds the leader's visionary leadership and no one ever finds out. Only when things go terribly wrong do people begin to question the leader. However, things don't always go terribly wrong, and many such leaders in the past have gone through their entire career without much difficulty. They made up their lack of inspiring and empowering leadership by their sheer individual brilliance.

All of this is about to change if it hasn't already. The world is becoming increasingly complex, and the rate of change is only accelerating. Today, no one individual has all the answers. And even if you do have all the answers, why limit the organisation's success to just your own brilliance? The best leaders realise that in order to enable their organisations to achieve its full potential, they must unleash the creativity and energy of all their employees. The first step they take towards doing so is to enlist a handful of co-leaders, and willingly share top leadership with them. Instead of treating their direct reports simply as people that take instructions from them, they invite them to co-lead the organisation with them. It is a subtle but important difference in the way a leader looks at his top leadership team.

To find out if you are a member of a boss-led team of direct reports or a member of a group of co-leaders, consider the following questions:

1. Did you get hired to execute a part of a very set plan, or were you invited to shape the vision together?

2. Did your boss give you your goals or did you have a good two-way conversation before finalising them?

3. Does the team routinely get together to solve problems or does every member individually run to the boss for solutions and advice?

4. Do you feel empowered enough to make decisions on behalf of your organisation or do you need the boss's approval on most things?

5. Is your boss willing to take constructive feedback, and do you feel safe enough giving it to him?

6. Does the team have a culture of forgiving mistakes, or are you as good as your last mistake?

7. Does the team routinely challenge itself to create an even better future for the organisation?

Years ago while working for a large multi national corporation in Asia I witnessed a great example of the difference between 'instructing subordinates' and 'leading with co-leaders.' Asia-Pacific was divided into two sub regions, each headed by a senior vice president. Both SVPs received the same directive from headquarters – reduce operating expenses by 25% in the next six months. One of them immediately called for his CFO and wrote out a detailed memo to all county heads under his command telling them what not to spend on at all, and what to seek his pre-fact approval for before spending. Nothing was left to chance. The memo clearly spelled out the do's and don'ts of expense control. Everyone was also expected to send in a bi-weekly report on how they were doing on their cost control drive. Of course, a standard reporting template was provided by the CFO.

The other SVP had a different approach. He arranged a conference call with all his country heads, and told them he had a great opportunity to discuss with them. "I know we are not having a great year, but we have an idea that can actually make our numbers look pretty decent by the end of the year even if revenue does not accelerate"

he said. Once he had everyone's keen attention, he continued, "I believe if we can save 25% of our operating expense budget between now and the end of the year, we will still be OK. I don't want to prescribe what we should or should not spend on because each of you face very different market conditions. Instead, I ask that each of you brainstorm with your teams and come up with your own plan to save costs. If something works particularly well for you, share it with your colleagues so they can also implement it if it makes sense in their context. That's it. Please do your best. If you can give me back more than 25%, I will really appreciate it. Let me know if you need my help in any way."

I don't need to spell out which one of the two teams was a group of co-leaders, and which one was just a team of direct reports. I also don't need to tell you which team achieved more than 25% cost savings, and with pride. While this maybe a simple example, the idea behind treating your senior leadership team as co-leaders instead of just direct reports should be abundantly clear. Who do you lead, co-leaders or subordinates?