

2 Pages on Management



Introduction

*What does it take to be a good manager? Well, management in modern organizations does not really follow predetermined patterns. It's not enough to read a couple of management books or attend an online management school. In fact, instructions can hurt you more than they help, if you don't realize that there are no recipes for how you should act. I believe that the only way to become a **good manager** is to also be a **leader**. Only then should you start working on those colorful reports that will make your manager happy.*

Manager versus Leader

These two words seem to be synonymous, don't you think? A manager, surely, must also be a leader. And for someone to have the authority to act as a leader, that leader must obviously also be a manager. **Wrong.** A manager is a role and a profession – *anyone can be assigned to it*. Attached to the manager's definition are quite a few responsibilities, such as handling personnel issues, following budgets, all kinds of ~~being~~ reporting, and so forth. A leader, on the other hand, does not come with a definition, and she most certainly cannot be anyone.

The leader is always chosen by the ones who follow. No upper management involved. No board decisions. We simply follow the people we believe in. I must be very clear about one thing; following a leader does not imply giving up any personal beliefs or giving up your freedom in any way. It is a very personal choice, and as such it retains all of your individuality. You follow to get things done, and because it feels right.

So who is better, the manager or the leader? Well, for one thing, *they are often the same*. Good managers *are* leaders¹. But consider this – a manager might suck and still be a manager for eternity², but leaders without followers...aren't. And seriously, how many aliens have ever landed on your back yard asking you to "Take me to your manager"?

¹ Leaders, on the other hand, are not necessarily good managers.

² This is a very common situation, since people tend to get promoted to their level of incompetence.

Becoming a Manager

In the technocratic environment of software houses, future management is often found in the ranks of current engineers. We are (or should be) doers. What do we easily identify with? We look for others who can get things done, and who have the scars to prove it. That's how we find our leaders. (*And this is fine – if you are a skilled software engineer, always strive to develop your leadership skills.*) But unfortunately, upper management often looks for the same thing. **Who stands out from the crowd?** Obviously, it's the highest performing engineers. "*Look, she really gets thing done! And people seem to follow her advice.*" Wow, you're up for a promotion, congratulations! However, management potential is all too often confused with excellent technical skill.

Actually, if you already are a leader, **becoming a manager is a very real threat to your leadership**. As strange as this may sound, it's true because your new authority comes with a bunch of new responsibilities. Management meetings, reports, more phone calls, more email – the burden of communication and synchronization tasks can easily take you far away from the action in the trenches. **It might take you away from the things you do best.**

Remember, people choose their leaders. They will choose someone who cares, someone who's there³.

Becoming a Leader

I believe that leadership in modern organizations must be **executed inside the business**, not behind the closed door of your office. If you are a manager trying to climb the walls of a technocratic castle, just stop climbing. Join your programmers in the moat. Be there for them. Understand what they do, and what they don't do. Listen to the undercurrents in their everyday situations. Look for the leaders that they follow, and understand why. Care about the things that stand in the way of their success. Take an interest in the technologies they work with. **Talk to them**. Tell them about management issues that are important to you – make them as much a part of *your* world as you become part of theirs.

The bottom line; to become a leader, you must first become a member. Then, your people might follow.

Avoid Losing Your Stars

If you are part of management in your organization, be very careful when you seek new managers among the best of your programmers. **The worst scenario is when you promote one of the best producing people and find out that she is a useless manager**. That's not uncommon⁴. There is still hope, though, because technical over-performers can often learn very quickly, including how to be a manager – if they still want to. Your job is to help them. The best scenario, well, you already know it. That's why you want to promote the stars in the first place.

Remember, the leaders in an organization don't necessarily have to be managers. But they have to be rewarded, and treated like the precious and scarce resources they are. We all depend on them to get the job done.

Thank you for reading,

Bjorn Karlsson

³ Reach out and touch faith.

⁴ Although in our line of business, the she is almost always a he.