

Leadership: legitimate power

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People often approach me at conferences and training courses and ask my opinion of new forms of organization, such as holacracy (see also my article: Holacracy & Co.: a question of autonomy, teamwork, cooperation and, above all, leadership), liberated companies or democratic leadership.

It is true that some enterprises and organizations have launched initiatives of this kind and are saying: “We no longer have bosses!”, “Power is decentralized, democratized”, or even “Power lies with the employees”.

I remember how, just a few months ago, a conference participant called out in the auditorium: “We no longer need bosses in our company; we’ve done away with them. I’m just an employee like everyone else. I no longer have the title of CEO.” During the break, I spent a few minutes with him, very interested in the step his company had taken, and listened to what he had to say. After he had explained how decisions were taken in house, I asked him if his company had a vision. He immediately answered: “Yes, of course!” Then I asked him who had developed this vision, and how. His answer was just as immediate: “Me and my partner, the business owner.” Bosses there may no longer be, but **leaders**: definitely yes.

Allow me, then, to share with you a few thoughts about leadership, power and legitimacy.

These ideas can be found to some extent in earlier articles and in the book “LEADER pour une économie durable” (*LEADER for a sustainable economy*). This book is the fruit of 25 years’ experience of leadership and, in particular, reflects the thousands of answers I have received from employees of businesses of all sizes in Switzerland, France, Germany and the UK to the question: “What makes a good boss?” Their expectations are presented in an 8-minute video (www.lp3leadership.com).

Leader (Leadership)

The trend and the expectations are quite clear. We are increasingly moving away from the notion of “boss”, or even of “manager”, towards the concept of “leader”.

The fact is that the sheer speed, complexity and uncertainties generated by the modern world are increasing our fears and our need for security. We need CONFIDENCE. In recent years, this is the word that has come up most frequently in our surveys. To have confidence, we need a guide.

So my first definition of leadership is: *Leadership: the capacity to create momentum, to move people towards a common objective, an attractive vision, via a stimulating, creative and inspiring framework.*

My second definition is even more to the point and requires some clarification: *Leadership: legitimate power*

I am convinced that we need, and will always need, leaders: I do and so do you!

Sometimes I am the leader and sometimes a follower, and I am very happy to be able to follow a leader. I’ll come back to this a bit later. Let’s talk about legitimate power.

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Power

When I talk about this notion in a corporate setting, and I ask about its associations, it is often its negative aspects that are mentioned.

But the fact is that power in itself is neutral. It comes from the Latin *potere*, meaning to have the capacity to do something. What makes it negative or positive is what I do with it! In other words, what matters is how I use my power. Something I often do with training course participants is to get them to think about the sources of power, and consider where this power comes from (networking, skills, resources, information, status...). What is more, for there to be power there have to be two parties. There has to be someone who submits to, accepts or follows this power, my power.

This is where the notion of legitimacy comes in.

Legitimacy

When I say that leadership is legitimate power, what is it, or rather who is it, that gives me this legitimacy?

In the past, and to some extent even now, it was status, position or reputation that conferred power. However, we can see that respect for authority (deference) is on the wane (see my article: How to earn respect: Set a good example!). Young people need direction and meaning.

So, in the context of leadership, it is other people (the employees) who confer legitimacy. If they agree to follow me, we drive performance. So you can see that my two definitions of leadership are connected.

What happens if you lose this legitimacy? You will certainly have experienced this, as have I. The danger, in a case like this, is to use raw power: "You have to do it because I'm your boss, your father..." Does that sound familiar?

We need leaders and we always will do.

For myself, I have always loved being a visionary, taking initiatives, creating momentum, inspiring others. I have thrown myself into it, all my expertise and resources, and my employees, customers and partners have generally followed me with conviction and enthusiasm. I have dared to take difficult decisions and bear the consequences. I have supported and protected my teams. I have been their leader.

In these circumstances, I was the leader. I have injected the necessary confidence. I have been the guide, their guide.

In other circumstances, where I lacked the skills, the resources and the drive, the leader has been someone else, and I have been very happy to rely on him or her.

Here is a very simple example to make this clear:

At work, in my own field, I am the leader. But in the jungle or a dense forest, I assure you that I would blindly follow the instructions of the survival specialist accompanying us. This person might be one of my employees. In the "jungle" context, he or she would be the leader and I would follow his or her instructions.

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Without a leader, I would be lost in the jungle, and that would also be true of various professional environments. So, to offset the uncertainties arising from lack of confidence, it will always be important to have leaders, people who can take the initiative, show the way ahead, accompany, guide, coach, inspire, stimulate...

I am a leader, you are leaders, we are all leaders.

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