

IT'S MORE THAN JUST SEMANTICS

IGCs need strong managers who are also strong leaders.



By Stan Pohmer

In my 26 years of working in senior positions in retail for both big box and smaller entrepreneurial companies, and then 25 years of helping advise companies and organizations as a consultant (yes, I really am THAT old!), I often encounter companies with strong managers with little leadership, or strong leadership with no management; rarely do I ever see companies with both strong management and strong leadership, or a leader who is also a great manager.

Thinking about this, I realized that one of the problems is that many of us don't understand the different roles and functions, or skill sets, needed for each of these positions.

Leader Versus Manager

We often use the terms “manager” and “leader” interchangeably, but there are distinct differences in what each is focused on, what their approaches must be, what skill sets are required to excel in their positions, and their roles within an organization. Here's a quick and dirty comparison to think about...

- The manager administers; the leader innovates.
- The manager maintains; the leader develops.
- The manager focuses on systems, process and structure; the leader focuses on people.
- The manager is more of a tactician; the leader is more of a strategist.

Managers pursue goals through coordinated actions and tactical processes, or tasks and activities that unfold over stages to reach a certain outcome. For example, they may implement a decision-making process or when devising a plan for communicating organizational change. Their focus

is on implementing a strategy, executing tactics, all the activities required to keep the day-to-day business running smoothly and efficiently. Managers are responsible for directing the teams that keep the retail machine humming. It's an easily defined role and set of responsibilities.

Leaders, on the other hand, are less focused on how to organize people to get work done and more on finding ways to align and influence, motivate, and inspire them. Leadership is a quality that needs to — and can be — shaped and developed.

Managers succeed by developing their technical and operational skills, and training and developing their team to implement measurable activities. And they get promoted for demonstrating proficiency in these functions. However, human nature dictates that people promoted for high performance of a given skill set generally replicate these same skills — the skills that got them recognized and promoted, in their next, more senior leadership position. And therein lies a problem for smaller, entrepreneurial businesses like yours.

It takes years to develop the skill set and acquire the experience to truly excel at a manager's job. And most of these skills are “hard” behaviors, meaning that they are job and performance oriented. It's understanding how the system works and finding ways to get the job accomplished.

Though it's important for a leader to have a good working knowledge of the business, he/she needs an additional set of skills to perform their role. They need to acquire the soft skills to be effective; things like strategic thinking, empathy, self-awareness, and emotional intelligence.

I heard a quote many years ago that pretty much sums up the difference between managers and leaders. “A manager works in the business, while a leader works on the business.”

Developing Leadership Skills

It's been said that leaders are born; in some instances, this is true, and there are some natural leaders. But it's also true that leaders can be developed if they have the right innate

traits and characteristics that can be honed and developed. Consider that the U.S. Marine Corps has a structured training program for potential officers that is entirely focused on developing leaders (and a fine job they do!). And the big-box retailer Target made the conscious decision to take their store managers and develop them to be store leaders through a structured training program.

I genuinely believe this focus on leadership is a core reason why Target stores look and feel different from most of their direct and indirect competitors, are more appealing to their guests, and are able to consistently stay ahead of the pack.

As an industry of small businesses with limited resources and flat organizational structure, we need strong managers who are also strong leaders. We already have an industry of very capable managers, now it's time to up the game and add the leadership skills needed to them so they can take your companies to the next level. Most community colleges offer leadership courses, as do many universities through on-line courses, and there are plenty of good books that can help train in leadership skills.

Defining Leadership

Just to whet your appetite, here are some of the principles that help define leadership:

- Self-awareness/self-management — know yourself and seek self-improvement; develop situational awareness of your environment, your team and your competition.
- Be technically and tactically proficient; understand the job at hand and what your team will have to do to accomplish your goals.
- Develop a sense of responsibility among your team.
- Make sound and timely decisions; there is no 100% solution. Plan, prioritize and execute. Be decisive amid uncertainty.
- Set the example.
- Know your team and look out for their welfare; make them successful.
- Take personal ownership; seek responsibility and take responsibility for the team outcome. Own any failures, share all successes.
- Keep your teams informed through regular and complete communication.
- Believe ... in the mission and in your team.
- Inspire and motivate.
- Train as a team — you're only as strong as your weakest link.
- Check your ego; your team will appreciate it and stronger teamwork will be the result.
- Keep things simple; complexity breeds confusion and complications.
- Learn to actively listen to make better decisions for your team and build morale.

Managers and leaders are terms we use interchangeably, but there are major differences. We have a strong cadre of great managers; let's work to develop them as strong leaders, too. It's more than just semantics... 🌱

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