

Leadership Talking Points

NEWSLETTER



Everybody's a Leader—Seriously

Leadership is a choice, not a position. – Stephen R. Covey

“Most companies divide people into leaders and workers,” says Jean-François Zobrist, former head of the highly successful French manufacturer FAVI. “They assume every oarsman on the boat needs someone with a whip to keep him at the oars. So you have oarsmen rowing very fast, but the boat is slow because it has to carry the weight of all those whippers.”

“This assumption is not only counterproductive, it’s profoundly unfair. Everybody’s a leader.”

FAVI is a new kind of organization where everyone is expected to step up and lead. Managers see themselves as “leaders of leaders,” and their job is to ensure the success of other leaders. In FAVI, a company of 600 workers, everyone has a leadership role that is often self-designed.

“For example, Frank, one of our operators, came to see me one day. He wanted to go scout for ideas—machines, materials, suppliers—that would make us more innovative. I told him, ‘Go do it. I believe you can succeed, but it’s not my decision. You’ll have to ask our co-workers.’” Frank persuaded them and made himself Leader of Importing Innovation. He travels the world and once a month comes back to report his findings, which have helped the company thrive.

When everyone is a leader, everyone is responsible for results. Zobrist told workers, “I am not responsible. You are responsible—to the client and to each other. So you need to lead out. You need to make the decisions. You are the leaders here.” As a result, performance soared. All of the political energy and time wasted trying to please the bosses went into pleasing the client.

FAVI is one of a growing number of thriving companies where leadership is for everyone. Virtually all decisions in the organizations are made by work teams in consultation with each other, where before they had been constrained by their place in the hierarchy.

“A company of 500 individuals, thus, has not one but 500 CEOs, any one of whom might have a breakthrough idea and be able to implement it, a true self-management move that is one of the major reasons for the astonishing success of so many of these organizations,” notes one observer. (For more of the story of FAVI, see Frédéric Laloux, *Reinventing Organizations*, xvii, 78–79.)

The idea that everyone is a leader is more than a mild paradigm shift.

Our current definition of leadership is extremely limiting. We usually think of a leader as someone who directs the work of others, but that is a narrow, starved view of leadership. Ultimately, it’s a damaging view because it deprives the organization of the leadership potential that lies untapped in the overwhelming majority of us.

As he spoke to his audiences around the world, Dr. Stephen R. Covey used to ask how many would agree that the typical organization doesn’t even begin to tap the leadership capability of its people. Nearly every hand would go up. This admission is the result of a paradigm of leadership that divides the world into a few leaders and many followers, and explains why the focus of leadership training is a small elite.

But the world we live in now demands that everyone develop the qualities of leadership: initiative, resourcefulness, vision, the ability to set and achieve goals, empathy, and creativity, among others. We can’t afford to cultivate these qualities in only a few “high potentials.”

“Leadership is a choice, not a position,” Dr. Covey taught. He believed all people have the potential to be leaders. Leadership is a primary trait of every human being, the kind of leadership that equates to unique contribution. By contrast, the trappings of leadership—position, popularity, public image—are secondary. A *CEO is no more likely to be a leader than anyone else*. Formal authority is not the same thing as leadership, which is actually a matter of moral authority and unique competency.

Imagine an organization where everyone is educated to be a leader. Imagine a firm where the entire culture—from the head office to the front-line operator—is purposely designed to produce leaders.

The organization that creates such a leadership culture will have a distinct competitive advantage in this century.

Questions to Ponder

We often hear the saying “Everyone is a leader,” but who takes it seriously? What is your paradigm of leadership? Is it limited to only a few elite people? What kind of organization would you have if everyone were a leader? How would it be different?