



The Primary Question

To lead or manage others you must know what you want

Tim Stevenson

LEADING AND MANAGING are necessary functions for the success of any group endeavor. An ongoing controversy is whether they are the same thing or two different things. My view is that they are *not* the same thing, but they do overlap at important places. One point of intersection is at the very start: **Leading and managing begin at the same place.**

In my ongoing search for helpful insights, I read widely; not only different subjects, but books from different eras. One older book from which I have gleaned significant help is *Managing*, the memoirs of Harold Geneen (1910-1997).

Through almost two decades spanning the late 1950s to the late 1970s, Geneen was president and CEO of ITT Corporation, which was the world's largest multinational conglomerate. Though he later stirred up some

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controversy through his involvement in some international politics, Geneen remained universally recognized as one of the best managers anywhere. ITT was sometimes called "Geneen University" because of the long list of executives who learned there and went on to lead other corporations around the world.

One caution, and something you frequently run into reading older books: There are



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assumptions and values that must be updated or discarded. Geneen, for example, was no role model on work-life balance. Beginning his business career during the Great Depression, he practiced a lifestyle that would doom most marriages and families, not to mention one's own well-being. So listen and learn with discernment, while maintaining an open mind to take away what is of value.

How did one of the world's great managers view his task? This is what Geneen says:

A three-sentence course on business management: You read a book from the beginning to the end. You run a business the opposite way. You start with the end, and then you do everything you must to reach it.

Play that back again. How do you run a business? ***"You start at the end, and then you do everything you must to reach it."***

Compare that to my working definition of a leader: You are a leader ***if you know where you are going*** and are able to persuade others to go along with you.

Leadership and Management begin at the same place

The primary question to lead or manage is, "What do you want?" You have to know where you are going before you can persuade anyone to go along with you. You must know the end you desire before you can manage yourself and your group to reach it. An old saying goes, "If you don't know where you're going, then any road will take you there." Without clear objectives, there's no basis for intelligent decision-making.

This is why I relentlessly urge leaders to **take time to think**. Why? Because the question, "What do you want?" is deceptively simple. It's harder to answer than it looks.

A favorite non-business writer, A. W. Tozer, said, "One of the ways the civilized world destroys men is by preventing them from thinking their own thoughts." How? I think it's basically two things: **noise** and **busyness**. To think our own thoughts, we have to turn off the noise and stop our activity. Without making time to think, people remain in a passive-reactive mode throughout their days, simply responding to stimuli around them.

Thinking time is a necessity. When he became president of Yale University in the 1980s, Benno Schmidt made this memorable comment:

If I can't put my feet on the desk and look out the window and think without an agenda, I might be managing Yale, but I will not be leading it.

Hearing that, there are always those who get hung up on the picture of an executive with his feet on the desk, but that would be missing his point by a mile. The point is Schmidt's valid fear that excessive busyness could prevent him from having time to think through what to do.

I actually take issue with a different part of that quote. I don't think he would be "managing" Yale well, either (and I think he'd agree with me). He probably meant that he could at most keep the machinery going, which isn't the kind of managing an excellent organization needs.

Marcus Buckingham expresses the principle this way:

The chief responsibility of a leader is to draw clear conclusions. The best leaders take time out of their working lives to think... The time a leader takes to get clarity is time well spent.

I remember my mentor and friend Henry Brandt saying **"I schedule time every week to sit and stare."** That's how he got the clarity

necessary to be a practicing psychologist, author, and speaker, and run two or more businesses successfully, *all at the same time*.

Where Leadership and Management differ

While leaders and managers must *begin* at the same place, there are differences, too. One area where they diverge is in time frame.

Management deals mainly with the immediate to short-term perspective, with an emphasis on achieving what is observable, measureable, and accomplishable. When Geneen said, “You start with the end, and then you do everything you must to reach it,” he was speaking generally of a time frame of *one year or less*. He explains:

We planned in detail for the four quarters of the year ahead. Our two-year, three-year, and five-year plans were far more sketchy, and less important.

In this context he acknowledges that some things must be planned 3-5 years ahead, such as capital improvements or a new plant. Then he says,

But in principle, I did not believe in long-range planning. No one is wise enough to see five or ten years into the future and plan for it with any sensible certainty.

Leadership, in contrast, deals with the immediate to the long-term; from something that must be done *now* to the *never-ending pursuit* of an ideal. It may deal with what is

observable, measureable, and accomplishable, but leadership is also a perpetual drive to live out one’s values or achieve an ideal state.

A leader’s “vision” is his or her mental picture of how the future will be better than today. Without that vision, you will be unclear yourself on where you are going, and you can be sure you’ll struggle to persuade anyone to go along with you. You must be able to describe for people why things will be **better** if they follow you.

Leadership and management can thus be *distinguished*, but they cannot be *separated*. Harold Geneen writes (emphasis mine):

Leadership is the very heart and soul of business management. No one really manages a business by shuffling the numbers or rearranging organizational charts or applying the latest business school formulas. What you manage in business is people. . . . To my mind, the quality of leadership is the single most important ingredient in the recipe for business success.

When spoken by one of the world’s greatest *managers*, I think that’s worth listening to.

Whether you tend to think of yourself as “a leader” or “a manager,” the application is the same. You must know what you want, and that means you must make time to think in order to gain the mental clarity needed to advance toward your goal or vision.

Make the time. **L**