Introduction
There’s an old Norse word, Laed, meaning “to determine the course of a ship.” Our modern word “to lead” clearly derives from this ancient Viking expression. In today’s business environment, how should such guidance be carried out?

Four types of leaders and influence have been common:

- **The Strongman.** The rough-and-tough John Wayne type of leader isn’t afraid to knock some heads to get his followers to do what he wants. He leads by commanding others — he’s “the boss” — using the authority of his position to influence others, who comply mainly out of fear. If the job isn’t performed as commanded, some significant form of punishment is delivered to the guilty party. The most common behaviors of this kind of leader are instruction, command, assignment of goals, threat, intimidation and reprimand.

- **The Transactor.** This leader enters into exchange relationships with others. Instead of John Wayne, think of the behavior modification experiments of the 1960s and ‘70s, with pigeons pecking at levers in order to get rewards of food pellets. This leader influences through dispensing rewards in exchange for compliance from followers. Personal and material rewards are given in return for effort, performance and loyalty to the leader. Followers tend to take a calculated view of their work: “I’ll do what he or she wants as long as the rewards keep coming in.”

- **The Visionary Hero.** The most popular current view of leadership is the exciting and charismatic leader who inspires and motivates others. This person has an ability to create a highly motivating and absorbing vision of the future, and to energize others to pursue it. Such leaders can appear larger than life and they sometimes attain a mythic reputation. Although they provide inspirational leadership, it’s also mainly a top-down influence process. The leader is the primary source of wisdom and direction, and tends to occupy the spotlight while followers fade into the shadows. The leader uses behaviors such as formulating and communicating a vision, exhortation, inspiration, persuasion and challenge to the status quo.

- **The SuperLeader.** This person leads others to lead themselves. The focus is on the followers. Leaders become “super” — possessing the strength and wisdom of many people — by helping unleash the abilities of the followers who surround them. The SuperLeader multiplies his or her own strength through the strength of others.

**The SuperLeader Style**
The SuperLeader’s task becomes one of helping followers to develop their own self-leadership skills in order to contribute more fully to the organization.

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The SuperLeader encourages initiative, self-responsibility, self-confidence, self-goal-setting, positive opportunity thinking and self-problem-solving. Rather than giving orders, the SuperLeader encourages others to take responsibility. One especially important part of the SuperLeadership challenge these days is to ensure that followers have the information and knowledge they need to exercise their own self-leadership.

The SuperLeadership perspective transcends heroic leadership. In the past, the idea of a leader implied that the spotlight was on the leader. With SuperLeadership, the spotlight is placed on the followers. Followers, in turn, tend to experience exceptional commitment and ownership of their work.

Sometimes people confuse empowerment with permissiveness. But the two are definitely not the same in the case of SuperLeadership. Follower self-leadership isn’t a permission or a privilege, but a clearly focused strategy to empower through enhancing followers’ skill, confidence and, especially, knowledge and information.

All Leadership Types Needed

There are advantages to all four different types of leadership.

The Strongman can provide short-term compliance and short-term learning, albeit at the risk of low flexibility, dissatisfaction, high turnover, long-term rebellion, low innovation and an attitude of compliance.

The Transactor can provide good performance, job satisfaction and low turnover, but accompanying that style can be low levels of innovation and flexibility, a calculating, self-serving perspective in staff, and an attitude of compliance.

The Visionary Hero can provide high performance, enthusiasm, long-term commitment and emotional involvement, but difficulties occur in the leader’s absence because of the dependence on him or her, and problems can arise if the leader’s vision is incorrect or unethical.

The SuperLeader can provide high long-term performance but that might be preceded by short-term confusion and frustration. High follower self-confidence and development will occur, with very high flexibility, high innovation and ability to work in the absence of the leader, as well as strong teamwork.

With SuperLeadership, the important twist in the leadership process is that followers are now treated as — and become — leaders. This requires some mental adjustment. For example, if followers lead themselves, then is the leader even leading at all? The answer is yes, although the specific behaviors are quite different. The leader is leading followers to be the best self-leaders they can be.

Self-Leadership

That systematic process begins with an understanding of self-leadership: the way we influence ourselves to enhance our own satisfaction and performance.

Some people are inclined to self-leadership, through genetic predisposition, family background, schooling and professional training, or the general social environment. But not every employee comes with a fully developed repertoire of self-leadership skills. However, self-leadership can be taught, encouraged and maintained by a SuperLeader.

At the beginning of an employee’s career with an organization, the SuperLeader must provide orientation, guidance and direction. New employees, after all, are unfamiliar with the objectives, tasks and procedures of their positions and haven’t fully developed their task abilities. Even more importantly, they’re unlikely to have an adequate set of self-leadership skills.

Three Steps to Self-Leadership

Self-Leadership can be learned through three steps:

• **Initial Modeling.** The leader must demonstrate self-leadership to others. An executive who’s overly dependent on superiors would serve as a poor self-leadership model. You must, therefore, practice self-leadership in a vivid and recognizable way that can serve as a model for others. Employees will adopt the standards they observe in exemplary models.

• **Guided Participation.** When followers first attempt self-leadership, they need to do so in a safe and controlled environment, with the leader still there to guide and advise them. In this phase, the verbal behavior of SuperLeaders is critical. One effective tactic is to evoke self-leadership among followers through a series of directed questions.

To facilitate self-observation, for example, useful questions are, “Do you know how well you’re doing?” or, “How about keeping a record of how many times that happens?”

To facilitate self-set goals, the SuperLeader must...
ask, “How many will you shoot for?” and, “When do you want to have it finished?” and, “What will your target be?”

To promote self-evaluation leading to self-reward: “How do you think you did?” and, “Are you pleased with the way it went?” and, “Why don’t you try it out?” and, “Let’s practice that.”

To spur thought-focused self-leadership, questions might include, “How do you like your job?” and, “Have you thought about trying different ways of doing it that you might enjoy more?” and, “What opportunities do you see in the current problems you face?”

The aim, of course, is to give employees practice in thinking about and then implementing their own self-leadership behaviors.

• Gradual Development of Self-Leadership. An important part of SuperLeadership is shifting personal reward patterns as the follower becomes more and more capable of self-leadership. Initially, the SuperLeader rewards specific performance-related behaviors by the follower. As time goes by, the rewards shift from performance associated with the task to the process of self-leadership itself.

The primary function of the SuperLeader becomes one of encouraging, guiding and rewarding an employee’s self-leadership practice rather than directly providing instructions and rewards for performance. Some executives may resist this shift because, on first impression, it creates the illusion of having less control over followers. In the long run, however, the shift from direct, short-term control to follower leadership is highly desirable.

Conclusion

Moving employees toward self-leadership is advantageous to an organization. Nevertheless, it would be naïve to assume that relying on self-leadership is always appropriate. External executive control will always have a role in any organization. Also, it’s incorrect to assume that self-leadership and external control are mutually exclusive. Even in the most intensive external-control situations, employees always exercise some degree of self-leadership, and even when self-leadership is encouraged, some external leadership — primarily focused on productive task results — is commonly found and typically desired by employees.

Real SuperLeaders are willing to bet on their followers if there’s even a little evidence that they can handle situations without imposing external constraints. The default decision in most situations should be to move toward self-leadership. By acting this way, leaders are instilling a sense of confidence in their followers and introducing forces that can ultimately lead to self-fulfilling employee effectiveness.

A SuperLeader will be willing to take the risks necessary to provide the opportunity for followers to grow — and they’ll respond in remarkable ways. When SuperLeadership is given some time to work, the results in the long run will be substantial.

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