Untitled Leaders

by **Michael L. Peterson,** *Iowa Alpha '89*

When we look for stories or experiences about leadership, it's tempting to look "to the top." Look at the business-book best-seller list and you will see that most of the most popular business books of today (with the exception of *Dilbert*) are written by C.E.O.s, former C.E.O.s, or consultants who have advised C.E.O.s. Although there are many lessons that we can learn from these people, many of us are not senior managers in organizations, so our "tool box" of skills needs to be a little bit different from theirs.

In addition, the direction of businesses today requires that each of us takes a more active role in leading, where we can. Here are some of the trends that make this so important:

• **Downsizing**. In a 1993 survey, 22% of company leaders said they had plans to downsize and by an average of 10% of their work force. This means that fewer people are available do to the same or more work, which requires . . .

• **Flatter, leaner organizations**. As companies become smaller and leaner, people need to be organized in different ways to get the work done; there's no time or room for non-value-added layers of management or approvals. This means a necessary increase in . . .

• **Flexibility.** Organizations need to be able to change quickly to respond to new challenges from competitors or to identify new opportunities in the marketplace. To make this possible, every member of the organization needs to know what to watch for and to be able to make changes happen, once the need for change is identified. Some of the ways that organizations are making this happen is through the use of more temporary employees, the increased use of consultants for special projects, and increased electronic communication throughout the organization to transmit ideas faster.

The common requirement among all these trends is that people at all levels of the organization need to be able to think and work independently, while at the same time supporting the direction of the organization. In each interaction with coworkers, customers, or suppliers, everyone needs to be able to "do the right thing" and do it well.

So, what does it mean to lead in these new types of organizations? In a smaller, flatter, more flexible organization, the leaders are no longer just the people with the title of "manager," "director," or "executive"; everyone has to be able to lead when the situation requires it.

So, what does it mean to lead? The best definition of leadership that I've ever seen is this: *getting people to do things that they would not have done otherwise.* Here's what this definition means and doesn't mean:

• The leader does not have to be the one with all the ideas; ideas may come from others or may be developed by a team. The leader, however, does make it possible for these ideas to be developed and implemented.

• An official title isn't necessary to be a leader; anyone who is changing people's minds or creating new courses of action is leading.

• Being a leader doesn't have to mean arguing with people, screaming at people to get them to do something, etc. (Although these types of "leaders" are certainly visible, they are usually not effective!) There are many reasons why people may "not otherwise do" something: ability, different priorities, misunderstandings, lack of knowledge, or lack of a process. Only a small portion of "not doing" things is due purely to someone not being motivated.

By this definition, and as a result of the trends described earlier, each one of us in an organization needs to be a leader at one time or another; the success of the organization depends on it! We all need to realize when we need to be the leader, and we need to know what tools or skills make it possible for us to be a leader. If we can do this, we are more able to use our talents and knowledge to their fullest potential, and we can better support and serve the organization that we are a part of, whether it is a company, volunteer organization, church, or even a home. In this article, we'll refer to these people as the "untitled leaders."

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The goal in this article is to identify some of the skills that are especially important for you, the untitled leader, and to encourage you to grow in your use of these skills. These skills can be divided into two general categories:

- **One-on-one:** interpersonal skills, and
- **One-and-many:** meetings and group interaction, teamwork, creative thinking, and problem solving.

Interpersonal Skills

By *interpersonal skills*, we mean the one-on-one interactions with other people to solve problems every day. These are probably the most basic types of skills everyone needs in order to be comfortable and successful in dealing with others. Here are some of the types of problems we face that fall into this category:

- "How do I explain my problem to Judy without getting her angry or sounding like I'm blaming her for it?"
- "How do I get Bob to help me out on this project, when it seems like he doesn't want to participate?"
- "How can I help Chris in addressing her problem with the TCP/IP file transfers, even though I know she knows more about it than I do?"
- "What do I do if I start talking to Pat about finishing our report and he blows up at me because he was passed over for a promotion yesterday?"

When we think about these types of problems, it's easy to think that solving them must be easy for the person given the title of "manager" or "director," because he or she can just say something needs to be done, and people do it. However, the vast majority of us don't have the luxury of being the "boss" to the people with whom we're working. More importantly, no matter who we are, we get much better cooperation from people if we don't use an "I'm the boss" attitude.

Our goal should be to help people *motivate* themselves to do something differently, not to force them into it. There are many benefits to motivating people in a positive way rather than a negative way — people are willing to do things on their own in the future, they are able to handle other similar problems more effectively, and it's much easier on us as the problem solvers because we don't need to spend extra effort to make sure the job was done! When the problems take the form of ability problems (someone wants to do something, but they can't), this attitude is even more important. We can't order people to do something they don't know how to do! (Sounds silly, but has it ever happened to you?) The key here is to ask for ideas; by brainstorming together, two people can come up with far better ideas than either one can separately.

Meetings and Group Interaction

As organizations work to become leaner and more flexible, it's critical for people to be able to work together effectively. Working together effectively, however, involves much more than just getting several people to show up at the same place at the same time, although that in itself can be a challenge! Once people are together, it's important to structure the meetings so that people stay on track and accomplish things.

The untitled leader can (and must) contribute in two ways in these settings:

(1) *Meeting facilitator.* The person responsible for calling and organizing a meeting is often an untitled leader. When in this role, the untitled leader needs to know how to handle the following tasks:

- Organize an agenda — whom to invite, what to discuss, and in what order.
- Set up a room — space requirements, layout to best accomplish the meeting purpose, audio visual equipment.
- Introduce the meeting — review the agenda, accept revisions to the agenda.
- Manage group process — keep people on track, get input from everyone in the room, check for agreement on decisions before changing topics.
- Document meeting results — distribute minutes, follow up on agreed-upon action plans.

(2) *Meeting participant.* In a successful meeting, everyone takes some responsibility for making the meeting work. General tasks that each participant should feel responsible for include:

- Sticking to the agenda.
- Allowing time for others to share their views.
- Being open to new ideas.
- Sharing concerns or criticisms in a constructive manner.
- Ensuring that action plans are set and understood for any open items.

Teamwork, Creative Thinking, & Problems

The "next step" in interacting with others successfully is the ability to generate new ideas together and to function as a team, not just a group of people in the same place at the same time. A good definition of a team in this sense is similar to how we defined a leader earlier: *a team is a group of people who are able to accomplish things together that would not have been accomplished otherwise.* Characteristics of a successful team include the following:

- *Open.* Team members are comfortable sharing concerns and ideas with one another without the fear of not being accepted.
- *Flexible.* Members share responsibilities in order to become more effective and to help each other learn new skills.
- *Effective.* The team is able to accomplish the tasks it sets out to do.
- *Supportive.* Team members are willing to help each other, and to even cover for each other when necessary, because they know that others are doing their share and may later return the favor.
- *Resourceful.* Members do what needs to be done and are creative in how they use what's available to them.

As we look over this list of qualities of an effective team, we can see that in a strong team everyone takes responsibility for each one of these items. As with planning a typical meeting, a team "leader" or facilitator may be necessary in order to get everyone to the same place at the same time, but when it comes to really making the team work, each one has a part to play. All members need to think of themselves as untitled leaders to make it work.