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UPDATING THE MEANING OF LEADERSHIP
A GRASS-ROOTS MODEL FOR THE NEW WORKPLACE

What does it mean to be a leader in today's organizations where more and more decisions are getting "pushed down;" where executives, managers and supervisors are doing more "coaching" and less "directing;" and where employees at every level are taking on broader responsibilities?

In working with organizations like these, Achieve-Global consultants have observed some interesting shifts in the practice—although not yet the theory of leadership.

On the one hand, more and more people not traditionally considered leaders are performing leadership behaviors. In some cases they're stepping up to the challenge because a manager or supervisor is unavailable. In others, they're spontaneously incorporating leadership behaviors into their daily work, fine-tuning an ongoing activity to make it align with a new business goal, for example, or taking the initiative to iron out a problem with a co-worker.

On the other hand, employees who have been traditionally considered leaders—executives, managers and supervisors—are no longer automatically seen as leaders just because of their job titles. They're having to develop new sources of authority and credibility.

To learn more about these shifts, AchieveGlobal recently conducted a formal study of leadership behaviors in 450 organizations across the U.S. and Canada. In effect, this study took almost 2,000 individual snapshots of what people at all organizational levels think leadership is today—as opposed to what it used to be or what experts say it should be.

From this study a new, grass-roots model of leadership has emerged. Not yet formalized in books, college curricula, or even job descriptions, it lives throughout organizations in the minds and behaviors of the men and women who lead and follow every day of their working lives.

The new outline of leadership that emerges from an analysis of these snapshots includes:

- a list of the 17 skills or competencies that demonstrate leadership

- a sense of who does the leading in today's organizations

- implications concerning what organizations can do to improve leadership

AchieveGlobal has been investigating leadership for several years, with special attention to leadership in organizations going through major change. In the early 1990s, AchieveGlobal research identified elements of success for several types of improvement efforts, as well as the impact of executive support on such success. This work was published in a 1994 paper and forms the basis for much of AchieveGlobal's consulting work with executive teams.

In working with these executive teams, Achieve-Global consultants found that successful executive leaders focused on five strategies. These strategies make up what is now called the CLIMB model:

- **C**reate a compelling future—by creating, communicating and sustaining a vision.

- **L**et the customer drive the organization—by knowing what customers want and need and by helping the organization use this information to make key decisions.

- **I**nvolve every mind—by giving employees and teams the responsibility, resources, training and support they need to improve both their work and the organization.

- **M**anage work horizontally—by focusing on inter-departmental work processes and the technologies underlying them, applying systems thinking, using analytic methods to analyze results, and creating links among groups.

- **B**uild personal credibility—by walking the talk all the time, not only when it's convenient, by sharing mistakes as well as successes, by encouraging others to do the same, and by demonstrating personal commitment.

Today these strategies are the foundation of a validated, 360-degree, multi-rater instrument that allows executives themselves, their direct reports, and a selection of others in the organization to evaluate the performance of top executives.

To understand more about the relationships between executive leadership and leadership at other levels of the organization, AchieveGlobal analyzed more than 100 recent leadership studies. This analysis showed that despite its importance, there's surprisingly little agreement on what constitutes leadership. The only leadership characteristic universally cited in all these studies was "vision:" all the studies found that effective leaders helped establish a vision, set standards for performance, and created a focus and a direction for the organization.

The only other leadership characteristics usually (but not universally) cited were the ability to communicate a vision, a commitment to and a passion for the organization, the ability to communicate this commitment, and the ability to inspire trust and build relationships.

In addition to these leadership studies, Achieve-Global also reviewed five general competency studies. These studies, which describe the basic skills and competencies employers seek in employees, revealed no common identification of leadership behaviors. Of the three studies that examined leadership competencies, each defined leadership differently.

Moreover, none of these studies focused on leadership outside the positions traditionally associated with leadership, i.e., executives and managers. Most, in fact, concerned themselves only with senior management.

Left out, in other words, were project leaders, team leaders, frontline workers, and technical and professional employees (individual contributors like engineers, designers, analysts, team members and programmers). Yet in today's pared-down organizations, these are precisely the employees who, even though they don't have "official" leadership duties, are nevertheless called upon to exercise leadership every day.

THE ACHIEVEGLOBAL STUDY

The 450 U.S. and Canadian organizations in this present study range in size from fewer than 250 employees to over 10,000 and include a mix of heavy manufacturing, high-tech, and service industries as well as government agencies and educational institutions.

To get beyond traditional definitions of leadership, AchieveGlobal researchers set aside books and studies and zeroed in on leadership competencies. "Competencies" refer to the behaviors people actually use to perform a given job or set of tasks—in this case leadership—not the behaviors they think they should use or have traditionally been taught to use. The concept of competencies emerged in the 1950s in response to a concern that medical schools were over-emphasizing general intelligence testing as a way to select students instead of testing for the specific competencies required for success.

To determine the competencies of leadership, AchieveGlobal followed the critical-incident methodology, which has been used in thousands of studies since it was first developed in the 1950s. In each organization surveyed, researchers randomly selected two people—one manager or supervisor and one nonsupervisory employee. Without being given any definition of leadership, these respondents were simply asked to recall recent examples of both good and bad leadership.

The researchers collected 1,871 "critical incidents." They then analyzed them for commonalities and differences and grouped them in categories according to the competencies they seemed to demonstrate.

Respondents were encouraged to give examples using not only managers and supervisors, but also nonsupervisory employees. The employees that respondents cited as leaders fell into three categories:

- Executives, managers and supervisors

- Professional, nonsupervisory employees (technical employees and such individual contributors as technicians, analysts and engineers)

- Nonprofessional, nonsupervisory employees (hourly, clerical and manufacturing)

WHY THE CRITICAL-INCIDENT METHODOLOGY?

The critical-incident methodology is well suited to establishing a baseline set of tasks for a "real-life" definition of leadership. The incidents respondents recalled represent their "top of mind" concept of leadership without any analysis or ranking. When respondents mentioned a critical incident in this study, it meant only that they associated it in their minds with leadership, for whatever reasons.

The critical-incident methodology is inductive; it starts from specific incidents and moves to more and more general categories called competencies. Here's a simplified example of how it works.

- Among the incidents reported were these two: (a) A nonsupervisory "employee got the staff connected to a PC system without being given step-by-step directions," and (b) A non-supervisory "employee volunteered to set up recycling projects throughout the company."

- After analyzing these and similar incidents, researchers decided to create a category for them that they called "takes initiative to solve a problem."

- Researchers then considered other categories they had created that seemed to be related—such as "implements good ideas," "works extra hours," and "helps others"—and combined all these to form a bigger category they called "takes responsibility." This is a competency.

It was not part of the methodology to perform a statistical analysis of a representative sample of behaviors. The object was to uncover the full range of behaviors that make up leadership competencies, regardless of frequency or organizational level.

FINDINGS

The findings suggest several intriguing hypotheses (see the following sections, "Analysis" and "Food for Thought") that we believe are well worth further research.

However, the most important outcome of this study is the list of leadership competencies it produced. Together, these provide a new baseline of data about leadership behavior—free from the limitations of past studies and, to a great extent, free from traditional definitions of leadership that may no longer be relevant.

1. Leadership can be defined in terms of 17 competencies. In the course of analyzing and sorting 1,871 incidents, researchers came up with over 120 categories of behaviors. These were further grouped into the following 17 competencies:

- Setting or sharing a vision

- Managing a change

- Focusing on the customer

- Dealing with individuals

- Supporting teams and groups

- Sharing information

- Solving problems, making decisions

- Managing business processes

- Managing projects

- Displaying technical skills

- Managing time and resources

- Taking responsibility

- Taking initiative beyond job requirements

- Handling emotions

- Displaying professional ethics

- Showing compassion

- Making credible presentations

These competencies indicate the behaviors people most often associate with leadership. In other words, these competencies are what people think leaders do.

2. These 17 leadership competencies describe leadership at all levels of management, from the CEO to the frontline supervisor. They are also found among nonsupervisory employees. As one might expect, executives, managers and supervisors were mentioned more often than other employees. However, one-third of the leadership examples featured nonsupervisory employees.

3. These competencies align with earlier Achieve-Global research on successful executive behaviors. When researchers compared the 17 competencies in this study with the five CLIMB strategies, they discovered a very good match as depicted in the chart below.

COMPETENCIES	CLIMB STRATEGIES
Setting or sharing a vision Managing a change	**C**reate a compelling future
Focusing on the customer	**L**et the customer drive the organization
Dealing with individuals Supporting teams and groups Sharing information Solving problems, making decisions	**I**nvolve every mind
Managing business processes Managing projects Displaying technical skills Managing time and resources	**M**anage work horizontally
Taking responsibility Handling emotions Displaying professional ethics Showing compassion Making credible presentations Taking initiative beyond job requirements	**B**uild personal credibility

Without exception, all 17 competencies identified in this study were easily related to the five executive strategies in the CLIMB model. We can therefore use the five CLIMB strategies to further categorize the 17 behaviors.

The table below lists by competency the number of critical incidents recalled by the respondents when they were asked to cite good and bad examples of leadership in both supervisory and nonsupervisory employees.

Number of Critical Incidents for Each Competency (by CLIMB strategy and employment level)	Nonsupervisory	Supervisory	Total	Total as Percent of Grand Total
1. Create a compelling future	**18**	**111**	**129**	**7%**
Setting or sharing a vision	4	40	44	
Managing a change	14	71	85	
2. Let the customer drive the organization	**32**	**34**	**66**	**3%**
Focusing on the customer	32	34	66	
3. Involve every mind	**190**	**738**	**928**	**50%**
Dealing with individuals	71	270	341	
Supporting teams and groups	46	239	285	
Sharing information	13	102	115	
Solving problems, making decisions	60	127	187	
4. Manage work horizontally	**159**	**152**	**311**	**17%**
Managing business processes	24	59	83	
Managing projects	33	26	59	
Displaying technical skills	69	34	103	
Managing time and resources	33	33	66	
5. Build personal credibility	**208**	**229**	**437**	**23%**
Taking responsibility	57	95	152	
Taking initiative beyond job reqs	112	35	147	
Handling emotions	15	34	49	
Displaying professional ethics	8	41	49	
Showing compassion	11	7	18	
Making credible presentations	5	17	22	
GRAND TOTAL			1,871	100%

Behind all these numbers are hundreds and hundreds of individual incidents, snapshots of behaviors memorable enough for respondents to recall them later as examples of good—and bad—leadership. With these snapshots, organized around the five CLIMB strategies, a new picture of leadership emerges, one that suggests:

- what people really think about leadership

- how good and bad leadership impacts today's organizations

- which issues merit further exploration

CREATE A COMPELLING FUTURE

The data – People in this study didn't often recall examples of individuals demonstrating this leadership strategy, which includes setting or sharing a vision and managing a change. Only 7 percent of all incidents fall into the "vision" category. Furthermore, of these incidents, less than one-fifth involve nonsupervisory employees. This is the lowest nonsupervisory participation in all five CLIMB strategies.

The low number of incidents overall contrasts sharply with other leadership competency studies in which "vision" is always included.

The incidents – Most of the positive examples cited portray leaders as painting a concrete picture of the future and putting the respondent and other people in it. Respondents used phrases like "he made me believe it couldn't happen without me,"

"He made me believe it couldn't happen without me."

"She opened our minds to new processes, new technology."

"I felt like I wanted to make it happen, be part of it."

"she opened our minds to new processes, new technology," and "I felt like I wanted to make it happen, be part of it." Respondents also felt they participated in the result: "He asked us to help define the vision," "we felt heard," and "[the leader] created an atmosphere where people felt free to ask questions."

The negative examples refer to leaders' pessimism and to "shutting themselves in their offices," "not maintaining a focus on what's important," and "not telling people what was going on."

Impact on the organization – When performed well, the competencies described here generate the emotional commitment people need to stay the course through difficult and uncertain times ("people seem more charged up," and "the result was complete ownership").

When done badly or not at all, the result is more than lack of motivation, it's the anxiety that comes from not knowing or from doubting the direction you're taking ("people are unhappy; there is high turnover," "it sets things up for failure," and "momentum is lost").

Issues to explore – Organizations may not be doing a good enough job of "personalizing the future" for their employees. Even though executives may communicate the organization's vision on a regular basis, a more important issue may be this: Do executives, managers and supervisors know how to create from this message a "compelling future" all employees can get involved in and passionate about? Are organizations doing a good job of helping individuals, especially nonsupervisory employees, manage change? Are these employees' change efforts being recognized?

LET THE CUSTOMER DRIVE THE ORGANIZATION

The data – Only 3 percent of all incidents reported in this study mention focusing on the customer in the context of leadership; this is the lowest proportion of responses for all five strategies. Depicted in these incidents is an almost equal number of supervisory and nonsupervisory employees.

This finding supports earlier AchieveGlobal research with executive teams. In that research, this CLIMB strategy was rated slightly less important than the other four strategies by both executives and others. Interestingly, it was the only strategy in which both executives and others agreed on the need for executive improvement. A common complaint that emerged from this earlier study was that people spend considerable time collecting customer data that doesn't seem to get used.

"It opened the eyes of all employees and helped them understand how to work with the customer."

The incidents – The positive examples provided in this study contain such phrases as "going the extra mile," "learning more about customers," and acting as the "customer's advocate" within the organization, even to the point of confronting superiors.

Negative examples focus on making decisions without thinking about the customer ("management makes decisions without going to the staff to see what would be best for the customer") and not following through with a customer ("the individual made a decision to reorganize his area without consulting his key customers to obtain support").

Impact on the organization – If the purpose of "Create a compelling future" is to capture employees' hearts, the purpose of "Let the customer drive the organization" may be to focus their minds on external business issues. By letting the customer drive the organization, leaders encourage all employees to develop a business and strategic orientation to their work and to keep in sight at all times why their organization exists in the first place ("it opened the eyes of all employees and helped them understand how to work with the customer").

When employees don't feel their customers drive the organization, the ultimate impact on those employees may be a turning inward, an inability to see new business opportunities or handle change ("ignoring the customer reinforced … that there are always roadblocks when something new is suggested"), and a tendency to emphasize internal politics, turf wars and the like.

Issues to explore – Organizations may need to do more to help employees close the gap between focusing on the customer and being an effective leader. That such a gap may exist today is somewhat ironic, given the time and resources spent in the last decade on quality improvement training.

The context of training and customer focus raises other questions as well. Do employees at every level know not only how to collect, but also how to learn from customer data? Are they given the opportunity to do so?

INVOLVE EVERY MIND

The data – Fully 50 percent of all incidents cited by respondents in this study fall under this strategy. Eighty percent of these involve supervisory employees. About half the examples are negative.

The incidents – Whether performed by executives or others, this is the "empowering" strategy. Positive examples include phrases like "acknowledged everyone's input," "gives credit to people," "we now have input in decisions," and "she listened very well." One person reported that a leader provided clear information, even though he didn't have any final answers. Another said that the manager had "provided the needed support, and we were given the freedom to run with our own solution."

Negative examples describe behaviors that demeaned or discounted people. In some cases these actions amounted to a lack of common courtesy ("he humiliated one worker in front of another"). Others involved making decisions that did not include the thinking of others or, worse, asking for input and then ignoring it.

Impact on the organization – When leaders do a good job of involving every mind, they unleash employees' best efforts. They encourage employees to stretch themselves, develop skills, use their minds, and be creative. The result for the organization is maximum utilization of human resources ("good ideas are coming out" and the "team is working on the change with a lot of commitment"). The result for individual employees is growth, learning, and a sense of accomplishment and self-worth ("they will tackle anything for this person if asked").

"Good ideas are coming out."

"Team is working on the change with a lot of commitment."

"They will tackle anything for this person if asked."

When this strategy is ignored, problems persist and sometimes go underground ("this will only prolong the problem," "the organization lost, the employee has lost, and the work is still less than acceptable"). Employees tend to feel under-utilized, uninvolved, and in many cases actively disinclined to make any contribution. At an organizational level, the negative impact could well be the absence of new ideas and creative solutions and the continuing existence of hard-to-solve problems.

Issues to explore – The high proportion of negative incidents cited for this strategy (especially for the competency "dealing with individuals") suggests that there may be a large organizational payoff simply from encouraging employees to treat one another more courteously. In today's high-stress workplace, the ability to show respect for other people and for their intelligence, ideas, experiences and feelings may be more important than ever.

In this connection, have we concentrated too much on the big-picture, abstract theories of leadership? Do we need a stronger focus on basic, tried-and-true management skills, such as listening, giving constructive feedback, recognizing others efforts, and providing timely information?

And what about the letting go that's the flip side of employee empowerment? Many respondents described leaders who wouldn't let employees experiment, make decisions, take risks, or run with their own ideas. Why is this? Do such leaders lack the security and confidence that letting go calls for?

MANAGE WORK HORIZONTALLY

The data – Seventeen percent of all incidents reported fall under this strategy. Half involve supervisory employees, and half individual contributors.

The incidents – These incidents tend to illustrate the technical expertise, cross-functional nature, and management aspects of leadership: managing interdepartmental projects, bringing technical skills into play, and making good use of time and resources. Positive examples include such phrases as "individual identified major aspects, provided a master plan and a step-by-step process," "the project had stagnated and someone had to get it going again," "went around to people who were also being affected by the problem," and "did a good job by creating a process in a situation where there was no process." Cross-functional team efforts were also cited ("did a great job involving all the relevant stakeholders—design, building, and online testing" and "solved the problem by getting everyone involved in it").

Examples of poor leadership describe individuals whose work was sloppy or uncaring ("sent out an in-house software program that had not been thoroughly tested" and "presented reports with inaccurate numbers") or who didn't have the correct technical expertise. Examples of poor project management skills include such phrases as "assignments were given out to each team member, but without adequate guidance or follow-up," "things were put off until the last minute," "supervisor did not provide sufficient personnel contacts," "gave unrealistic time lines," and "staff members were more knowledgeable than [supervisor] was" but she didn't listen to them.

"The facilitator consistently kept us on target."

"We ironed out how certain transactions would be handled between department."

"We vastly improved output over last month."

Impact on the organization – When this strategy is performed well, the result for the organization is increased efficiency and speed, in part because issues are being addressed cross-functionally. Positive results cited include "the facilitator consistently kept us on target," "we ironed out how certain transactions would be handled between departments," and "we vastly improved output over last month."

When not performed well, the impact on the organization is frustration and continued inefficiency—especially damaging when an organization is trying to make major improvements. Phrases from respondents include "nothing ever got resolved," "wasted time and effort," and "it's like this place is revving in neutral."

Issues to explore – As organizational life becomes more cross-functional and people get involved in work they don't know well, the technical competence of leaders may become more important. This would be in direct contrast to the idea, most popular during the '50s and '60s, that leaders can lead without knowing too much about the work itself.

As cross-functional work increases, so too does the need for the skills of influencing and project management, especially for the growing number of managers and individual contributors. These individuals are being thrust into projects where they have no formal control over other project members, their work relationships and responsibilities are unclear, and the coordination of resources is challenging. Have we prepared employees for these tasks? Are we supporting them?

BUILD PERSONAL CREDIBILITY

The data – Twenty-three percent of all incidents, the second largest group after "involve every mind," fall in this category—and are equally divided between supervisory and nonsupervisory employees.

The incidents – According to this study, leaders develop their personal credibility by "just doing it." Respondents used phrases like "he stepped up to the issue and dealt with it," "didn't side-step the problem," and "took responsibility for the error as a representative of the company, even though he didn't do it himself." They described leaders not losing their temper ("during a confrontation with an angry employee, the supervisor did not get upset or angry"). They also cited instances of bravery, personal ethics, and demonstrations of commitment ("stood up for quality on her team despite the schedule pressure to release the product" and "stood up to a higher-level associate to tame an issue").

"The rest of the group followed his lead and calmed down."

"Improvements were made, issues confronted."

"It gave me more respect for her as a leader; also, the project got completed."

Another behavior people identify with good leadership is the ability to make presentations in which the message is clear and the speaker well-prepared ("his ability to speak well is known to everybody … he does his homework!" "forceful, but easy to relate to," and "CEO stood in front of a large group of employees and addressed hard questions and admitted that he didn't have all the answers").

Negative examples cited for building personal credibility center on avoiding difficult issues, such as failing to provide needed feedback on someone's performance ("her boss side-stepped the issue, reviewing only the results and ignoring the [extremely volatile] behaviors," and "there was no discipline in the department; the supervisor knew and did nothing"). Referring to a difficult situation for which neither of two top managers would accept responsibility, one respondent said, "Instead of demonstrating positive leadership skills, both managers passed the responsibility back and forth … [Ultimately] they let some lower-level people bear the burden." To her, this meant upper management "had no backbone."

The negative impact of being unprepared or having poor speaking ability was also mentioned: "He failed to make eye contact as he delivered his message. This was perceived as the leader holding back information," and "he seemed not only unprepared but uncertain of himself."

Impact on the organization – The positive impact of personally credible leaders is a feeling of trust and a sense of order that help the work get done. This is evident in phrases like "the rest of the group followed his lead and calmed down," "the chaos was brought to order," "improvements were made, issues confronted," "people trust his judgment, skills and abilities," and "it gave me more respect for her as a leader; also, the project got completed."

The negative impact on the organization is to reduce effectiveness and prevent progress. In this context, respondents made comments like: "they feel there is no direction in the organization," "the project is slowed down," and "a large organization was frozen for a period of time."

Issues to explore – Given the importance of personal interaction in demonstrating credibility, do organizations sufficiently encourage such behavior? This may be of special concern to executives and top managers who are often so preoccupied with strategic issues that they don't "have the time" to communicate face to face with other employee groups. Yet we know it is during such personal interactions that employees take the measure of each other and, on that basis, decide whether or not to buy in.

Taken together, these snapshots provide some interesting food for thought:

- Despite sweeping generalizations about what leadership means, people seem to associate it most often with little things—those sometimes throwaway moments that a "leader" may forget but that others remember, moments that can have a strong organizational and personal impact.

- Every day presents countless opportunities for supervisory and nonsupervisory employees alike to exert leadership. Many opportunities are often described almost in terms of "turning points," things large and small people did that made a difference in a positive or negative way. It would be interesting to know how many such opportunities are overlooked every day.

- In the long run, the old-fashioned, tried-and-true virtues may carry the day. The ability to treat other people courteously and honestly, to be straightforward, and to do their fair share, plus a little more, may be the most important skills leaders can learn.

- There may be more universality than was once thought in the types of preparation people at all levels of an organization need in order to be fully effective employees.

- Interpersonal skills may be of equal importance to employees at all levels, not just to those in the middle tiers. If so, this would represent an especially significant shift in thinking about executives as well as about highly trained professionals and individual contributors. In today's flatter, more empowered world, such employees may need interpersonal skills along with their technical expertise and business savvy.

This study raises many intriguing questions that merit further inquiry and research. As organizations continue to adapt to meet future challenges and opportunities, we will continue to chart the evolution of what it means to be a leader in this new world.

ABOUT ACHIEVEGLOBAL

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