

**PART III**

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**OPPORTUNITIES**

## Imperatives for Leaders

When we think about a great team, the image we conjure up almost always includes a great leader. A surgical team flawlessly executes a risky and demanding procedure. The lead surgeon emerges from the operating room to receive the gratitude of the patient's family. An industrial team regularly sets new plant production records. The team leader receives an award and soon thereafter is promoted. An airplane encounters serious problems, but the crew finds a way to work around them and lands safely. All applaud the captain. The final chords of Mahler's Resurrection Symphony reverberate in the concert hall. The conductor, exhausted but beaming, turns to accept the applause of the audience.

Our tendency to assign to the leader credit or blame for successes or failures that actually are team outcomes is so strong and pervasive that I'm tempted to call it the "leader attribution error." It occurs for unfavorable as well as favorable outcomes—the standard remedy for an athletic team that experiences a string of losses is to replace the coach, for example, and it is the conductor who is excoriated in newspaper reviews of a poor orchestral

performance. Moreover, it is not just outside observers or bosses who make the error. Team members themselves, the people who worked together to generate the collective product, also are vulnerable. Organizational psychologist Richard Corn asked members of a diverse set of teams, ranging from community health groups to a mutual fund company to military units, to identify the “root cause” of their team performance. For teams that were performing well, over 60 percent of the explanations had something to do with someone’s personality or behavior—and that someone frequently was the team leader. For teams that were performing poorly, 40 percent of the initial attributions were about personality or behavior.<sup>1</sup>

Even *inaction* by a leader is often viewed as causing what transpires in a team. For example, members of self-analytic groups (i.e., groups whose purpose is to help members learn from analysis of their own group experiences) generally hold their leader responsible for the rocky start that they invariably experience. In most such groups, the leader remains silent for the first few moments to ensure that all behaviors that occur are spontaneously generated by—and therefore owned by—group members themselves. The leader attribution error is so strong that the leader’s silence itself often is viewed by members as the main cause of what transpires. Only gradually do they come to accept and explore their own responsibility for the behaviors they have generated.

Highly trained and experienced professionals, people who perform demanding team tasks as part of their daily work, are as vulnerable to the leader attribution error as anyone else. A player in a top symphony orchestra, describing to me an extraordinary performance by the orchestra, reported that the conductor had “pulled out of us a performance I didn’t know we had in us.” A player in a different orchestra, explaining an unsatisfactory concert, complained that the conductor “just couldn’t get us to play beyond the notes on the page.” Only when there is significant ambiguity about whether a team’s performance was a success or a failure is the leader attribution error muted.<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes, of course, a team leader’s actions really *do* spell the difference between team success and failure. That fact, reinforced by the leader attribution error, has fueled a steady flow of tests, surveys, and educational programs intended to help organizations select and train great group leaders. That flow persists despite the rather poor track record, discussed next, of team leader selection tools and training programs.

## LEADER TRAITS AND STYLES

Clearly, some people are better than others as leaders of teams. It is quite reasonable, therefore, to try to identify the traits that distinguish naturally good leaders from those who consistently fail to get the best out of the people with whom they work. Literally hundreds of research studies have attempted to do exactly that, measuring a panoply of leader traits (e.g., intelligence, sociability, self-confidence, and dozens more) to see which ones predict leadership effectiveness. As long ago as the 1950s, it had become clear that research would not succeed in identifying any set of universal traits that could reliably distinguish good from poor leaders.<sup>3</sup> Many different attributes of individuals were found to be modestly associated with rated leader effectiveness and (especially) with who would be chosen to occupy leadership positions. But the practical usefulness of those lists was limited, both because they were so long (a dozen desirable attributes provide less clear guidance for action than does a handful) and because the size of the empirical relationships obtained was usually so small.

Contemporary research has not been much more successful in identifying the traits of superb team leaders than that done decades ago.<sup>4</sup> Neither hope nor the leader attribution error dies easily, however, and the common-sense belief that a leader's personal traits somehow determine his or her effectiveness in leading teams continues to guide both research and practice. The power of such thinking is perhaps best exemplified by the readiness of many members of the management community, as well as the general public, to accept the claim that a leader's "emotional intelligence" is the key determinant of team and organizational effectiveness. The irony is that many of the skills that are grouped under the emotional intelligence label are learnable. But use of the word *intelligence* as part of the label implies that whatever it is that emotionally intelligent leaders possess is at least an enduring personal attribute and perhaps even innate. It is bad enough that analytic intelligence, the kind of thing often referred to as "IQ," is so widely viewed as wired in at birth; it is even more troublesome that learnable leadership and interpersonal skills are labeled in a way to suggest that they are as well. Next, I suppose, someone will suggest that it is one's genetic endowment that determines how effective he or she can be as a team leader.<sup>5</sup>

There is a potentially optimistic implication of the rather pessimistic conclusions just drawn. If traits are not controlling, then perhaps *anyone*

can be a good team leader as long as he or she learns the right ways to behave. If it could be established that certain leadership styles are better than others for leading teams, then leaders could be trained to exhibit those styles no matter what their personalities or demographic attributes happen to be. This was the approach taken in a training course for airline flight crews that I once observed. Each pilot-student took a paper-and-pencil test that, when scored, revealed his or her characteristic style of operating in teams. Instructors then suggested that certain styles were better than others for promoting crew effectiveness. Students were taught, for example, that captains should foster task accomplishment and interpersonal harmony simultaneously, and that they should avoid both autocratic and relentlessly democratic leadership styles. And they learned that first officers and flight engineers should be assertive with their captains (but not excessively or unpleasantly so) when they notice something that concerns them. The hope was that the styles taught in the classroom would be used to good effect when the pilot-students returned to their regular flying duties.

Although the pilots, like others who take tests measuring leadership style, found them interesting and informative, I have a number of concerns about such devices.<sup>6</sup> For one thing, research has shown that there is no one leadership style that works well across all situations.<sup>7</sup> A style that may be just what is needed when working with competent, trusted colleagues to develop a team work plan may fail badly when a newly formed team encounters an emergency situation that requires a rapid, decisive collective response. For this reason, research on leader styles has evolved from a search for the one best style to contingency models that specify which styles should be used in different circumstances. Such models identify those attributes of the situation and of the group being led that determine what leader behaviors are likely to work best, and they provide research-based guidance about how leaders ought to behave in various circumstances.<sup>8</sup> Contingency models necessarily become quite complex as research identifies more and more contingencies that moderate the relationship between leader behavior and team outcomes. In that inevitability lies the rub: The more complete and complex a contingency model, the more it requires of leaders a level of online cognitive processing that can exceed human capabilities.<sup>9</sup>

A second problem with leadership styles derives from our everyday assumption that leader behavior is the *cause* of member behavior and team dynamics. In fact, a leader's style may in many circumstances be as much a

consequence of members' behaviors as it is a cause of that behavior.<sup>10</sup> If, for example, a leader is charged with managing a team of subordinates who are both competent and cooperative, the leader is likely to use a considerate, participative leadership style. But if team members are obviously not competent in carrying out the work and, moreover, exhibit hostility in their interactions with the leader, a much more structuring, directive, and autocratic style is likely to be exhibited. A team leader's style is not fixed. Just as a parent's style of interacting with a child often is more an effect of how that child is acting at the moment (tougher when the child is behaving poorly, democratic when the child sweetly suggests an after-dinner family conference to reconsider bedtime conventions) than a consistent expression of one's preferred style of parenting, a leader's behavior often is driven as much by how team members are acting as by the leader's espoused or preferred style.

Finally, there is the problem of getting newly learned styles transferred from the training setting back to the workplace. Leaders almost always like, and feel helped by, well-run training programs that seek to improve their styles. Moreover, training settings are explicitly designed to encourage participants to experiment with new behavioral styles, and to reinforce improvements in their existing styles. The problem comes when a participant leaves the supportive training environment and returns to his or her regular workplace where colleagues may have become quite expert in dealing with the "old" style of the leader—and therefore may be quite unreceptive to the new style the boss developed while away at training. In a contest between a fresh and still somewhat fragile style learned in school and the demands and expectations of the trainee's regular work setting, the new style almost always comes out the loser.

Indeed, those times when a newly learned style might be most valuable (e.g., when there is extremely important work to be accomplished under considerable stress or time pressure) are precisely the times when that style is *least* likely to appear. When a person becomes highly aroused (as typically happens under stress), he or she reverts to well-learned behaviors, exhibiting whatever response is dominant for that person in that situation.<sup>11</sup> Dominant responses rarely are displaced by what is taught and learned in a leadership training course; they are too deeply ingrained for that. To return to our pilot-trainees, even the best students in the seminar are likely to revert to their old, tried-and-true behaviors when a highly stressful situation such as an engine fire or the loss of all generators is encountered in line flying. A story told by Captain Reuben Black of Delta Airlines illustrates. Some years

ago, an instructor was attempting to get his students to memorize the thirteen steps that were to be taken in the event of a heater fire on a certain aircraft. The students were having trouble committing the list to memory, but the instructor persisted. Finally one veteran captain captured the essence of the problem when he exploded, “How the hell do you expect me to remember all this shit when I’m *scared*?” How, indeed?

So what is going on here? On the one hand, we all tend to overattribute responsibility for collective outcomes to the team leader. Although that tendency is often exaggerated to some extent—the leader attribution error—there is no doubt that what a team leader does (and doesn’t do) is highly consequential for team effectiveness. On the other hand, researchers have been unable to generate usable knowledge about either the traits that characterize great leaders or their characteristic behavioral styles.

Is it just that we need to try harder to identify and measure the right personal attributes and behavioral styles of team leaders to be able to select and train them well? Management scholar Chris Argyris, who I believe shares my pessimism about the efficacy of existing leader selection and training technologies, proposes that any substantial improvement in leader effectiveness requires a fundamental recasting of leaders’ “theories in use,” which are the perceptual templates and behavioral programs that people rely on in planning and executing their actions.<sup>12</sup> If one seeks to create enduring improvements in leaders’ behavioral styles, Argyris’s strategy of essentially reprogramming their personal cognitive models may well be warranted. But is there another approach to the development of competent team leadership, one that does not require such fundamental change in leaders’ personal styles of acting and interacting?

I believe there is. That alternative, which is explored in the rest of this chapter, involves a change of focus, from *who* the leader should be (leader traits) and *how* the leader should behave (leader behavioral style) to *what* the leader does and *when* in the life of a team it is done.

## WHAT EFFECTIVE LEADERS DO

Effective leaders attend first to the basic conditions that foster team effectiveness—the features of the team and the organizational context that have been discussed in this book. First of all, they make sure that