

Breeding Followers Who Lead: Changing the Networking Paradigm

[Leadership Advance Online](#) – Issue XXIII

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‘Leadership’ is a commonly used term in today’s organizational lexicon. It is frequently associated with every facet of business – failure, success, and innovation. Its very name alone conjures up images of “those at the top,” “people in charge,” and “people who are better off” than the rest of us. ‘Leadership’ is comprised of the people who get all the credit when the company succeeds and are a convenient scapegoat when failure rears its ugly head. It is the one unique concept without which no business can thrive. At the same time, it is the needle in the haystack for whose secret all organizations search in a never-ending quest for perfection and absolute success.

Leadership is an elusive concept that is the lore of many a leadership theory. Its tales have been captured in the annals of academic journals and tomes. Yet, for all of the time scholars and novices alike have spent trying to solve its riddle, there is little to show for the relationship between leadership and networking. Networking is often considered a social skill honed at cocktail parties or on the fairways of the links in an effort to advance one’s status and career. Organizations have been remiss in recognizing the role networking plays within the confines of leadership that surround their success on a daily basis.

Networking is crucial to business success. Redfern and Ho (2009) note, “Networking and connections are seen as a business necessity” (p. 38). One of the first tasks of management is to lead people. Developing positive, reciprocal relationships with others allows leaders to maximize their talents and abilities as well as serve their needs. “Networking involves creating personal contacts that help provide valuable support, feedback, insight, information and resources. Individuals who recognize the importance of networking move beyond their

functional capabilities and continue on the path toward successful leadership” (Boone & Peborde, 2008, p. 11). Organizations need successful leadership if they, in turn, are going to be successful; a major component of that leadership is the ability to successfully network. Ibarra and Hunter concluded, “Leaders must find new ways of defining themselves and develop new relationships to anchor and feed their emerging personas. They must also accept that networking is one of the most important requirements of their new leadership roles and continue to allocate enough time and effort to see it pay off” (Ibarra & Hunter, 2006, p. 8). In today’s global economy, organizations must utilize organizational change techniques and shift the paradigm.

This article examines popular leadership theory and its relationship to networking. It identifies methods of organizational change to recognize and promote effective networking skills that can be used both internally and externally in an organization.

Leadership Theory

In the world of academia, there is no shortage of leadership theories to identify and explain the causes and effects for leadership failures and successes. Scholars make a living researching, developing and writing about such theories. The annals of universities are replete with terms like “transformational,” “transactional,” and “leader-member exchange.” These terms and theories are valid and do explain many of the observed facets of leadership. However, leadership in practice does not conform to a single theory or fall within a specified set of parameters. Leadership is fluid. It is a perpetual work in progress. Northouse notes leadership is a process that involves influence, occurs in a group setting and involves goal attainment (Northouse, 2007, p. 3).

- **Process** – this “implies that a leader affects and is affected by followers” (Northouse, 2007, p. 3). In other words, leadership is a *reciprocal* exchange between leaders and followers. This relationship involves give and take on the part of both parties.
- **Influence** – “leadership is the sine qua non of leadership” (Northouse, 2007, p. 3). Influence is essential; it is paramount. A leader without influence is merely an individual. Influence is the bedrock upon which leadership is built, but it alone is not

enough. “While the influential position leaders have in organizations cannot be denied, they are only one component of an interactional framework which may be used to understand leadership and its influence more generally” (Hall & Densten, 2002, p. 90-91).

- **Groups** – “Leadership occurs in groups” (Northouse, 2007, p. 3). At the organizational level, leadership occurs in individual departments and divisions, between managers, supervisors and employees. Everyone is involved in the process.
- **Goals** – “Leaders direct their energies toward individuals who are trying to achieve something together” (Northouse, 2007, p. 3). Goal accomplishment is the finish line for some and the starting line for others.

The process of networking is predicated on leadership. “Fundamentally, networking is really about leadership” (Bishop, 2011, p. 2). Leadership is paramount to networking particularly within organizations because they function as self-contained systems where the process of leadership occurs. “Leadership is a living system with many relationships and dynamic, changing elements” (Smith, 1997, p. 277). Just as leadership is a process, so is networking. The two share common traits. Both involve influence, people and goals, and are continually evolving. Smith (1997) notes,

Leaders must motivate, empower and activate their people if organizations are to continue to improve, progress and learn to solve new problems. When leaders learn how to effectively leverage human competencies and other resources, and develop shared relationships, it is possible to achieve added team synergies and well integrated systems. (p. 281)

Included in the human competencies is networking. In order for leaders to learn how to effectively leverage their employee’s ability to network, they must implement organizational change that embraces a spirit of leadership geared toward maximizing shared relationships.

Organizational Change

‘Organizational change’ is a term that evokes images of corporate restructuring, mergers and the consequences that often accompany such events. “Organizational change is

considered the adoption of a new idea or behavior by an organization,” (Daft, 2007, p. 405) so it is understandable that it could have negative effects. One study noted that the negative effects of organizational change “are rooted less in the common human response to uncertainty identified by psychologists and more in perceptions that changes may threaten intrinsic professional rewards they derive from their work” (Daniels & Hollifield, 2002, p. 675).

In order for change to be successful, it must be accepted. Kotter notes, “The vital first step towards achieving successful organizational change is the creation of a sense of urgency and a need for change” (Smith, 2005, p. 409). It is incumbent upon leaders to provide the justification and reason for the change if it is to be implemented successfully. Implementing organizational change centered on networking as a method of leadership is no small task. However, it is important to remember “social networking can change the culture of a company because [it can] help weave two-way customer communications into the fabric of an organization” (Bennett, Owers, Pitt, & Tucker, 2010, p. 143). Simply stated, networking brings the right people together.

Changing the culture of an organization can impact the way it leads, and changing the way it leads can affect its bottom line. Mitroussi (2003) notes,

Organizational culture is a pattern of basic assumptions - invented, discovered or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration - that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 17)

In essence, organizational culture is an organization’s reason for being. Therefore, it is imperative to ingrain networking predicated on leadership theory. Changing the culture of an organization to embrace and maximize the networking that naturally occurs as part of its business routine will improve its leadership process. Thus, it will be a more productive organization.

Networking

Networking is a term that is often associated with the notion of using people for personal gain. While some people may, in fact, 'network' with others to benefit themselves, true networking is centered around genuine relationships where leadership runs rampant. "Networking is a reciprocal process, an *exchange* of ideas, leads, and suggestions that support both our professional and personal lives" (RoAne, 1993, p. 6). Networking is something that occurs on a regular basis in most organizations, whether someone is utilizing a connection in the mailroom to expedite merchandise shipment for a customer, or harnessing the power of a relationship to meet a deadline.

Making the most of a relationship to better the lives of others is the foundation of networking. In terms of business relationships, Thomas likens networking to "the management of social relationships" (Thomas, 1994, p. 656). Indeed, networking consists of building relationships that will flourish and assisting others to do the same. Thomas (1994) further contends, "The effective manager manages not only his or her own networks but also assists others (subordinates, peers, bosses, and everyone else in the organization they can influence) to manage their networks effectively" (p. 656). Successfully networking involves serving others by helping them develop their own networks thereby becoming better networkers. Leadership involves influence and so does networking. The ability to influence is paramount to building genuine relationships. Dobson (2005) states, "By being actively involved and pursuing networking opportunities, you will build relationships that enrich your life, broaden your horizons and enhance your career" (p. 8). Networking revolves around proactively building mutually beneficial relationships.

The very core of networking is comprised of relationships. "Relationships possessed by an individual can provide one with access to new information, resources, and opportunities" (Forret & Dougherty, 2004, p. 421). Networking provides the means; relationships provide the opportunity. By capitalizing on opportunities, employees can maximize their connections to benefit themselves and their organization. This, in turn, will empower them. Forret and Dougherty (2004) assert, "Taking the perspective of networking as a kind of developmental relationship, employees who are involved in supportive relationships with others often receive 'inside information' that can produce a feeling of empowerment in the organization"

(p. 422). Empowered employees build better networks and become better leaders.

Leadership, Change and Networking

Leadership and networking are both processes that involve people and goal accomplishment. Their success hinges on the ability to forge meaningful relationships that create a sense of worth and empowerment. Organizations can add to their success by creating change that fosters leadership through networking. In order to do this, organizations must:

- Understand leadership theory. Leadership theories are many, varied and complex. However, a working knowledge of them as a process is paramount to success. Muczyk and Adler (2002) note, "It is worthwhile noting that leadership is a process that can be shared between leader and some subordinates" (p. 15). Knowing the theories creates awareness, and awareness creates opportunity.
- Connect leadership theory with networking. McCallum and O'Connell (2009) note, "networking means developing and maintaining relationships with others who might assist one's career. Recent theory development suggests that the social capital resources available in a group add to a group's effectiveness, with a need for strong relationships within and beyond group boundaries" (p. 165). Strong relationships enhance the leadership of groups within an organization.
- Include networking practices as part of organizational change. When it comes to organizational change, managers need all the help they can get. "In particular they need to develop networking skills that can build support both vertically and horizontally" (Schaafsma, 1997, p. 43). Networking skill improves an organization's ability to implement change, especially if it is integrated with the change process.
- Identify the benefits of networking to the organization and the employee. Dickson and Hadjimanolis (1998) concluded that the "management of inter-organizational relationships, and networking in general, may well be critical for successful innovation by small firms" (p. 5). Just as success rises and falls on leadership, so does networking, which plays an integral role in an organization's ability to innovate and be creative.

Conclusion

Globalization is erasing national borders and changing the way businesses operate. Establishing mutually beneficially relationships is paramount to success. Gillian and Weerawardena (2006) note, “Networking capability is nurtured personally by the owner/manger to fulfill the strategic vision of reaching global markets” (p. 560) Human interaction is the foundation of life and has been since creation. That interaction is the foundation of relationships, and the success of those relationships falls squarely on the ability to network. Leadership is the lifeblood of organizations and is a key contributor to their success. An integral component of leadership is networking.

The ability to forge meaningful relationships amid blurring cultural boundaries is becoming increasingly vital for the proliferation of global business success. Incorporating networking practices as part of organizational change is crucial for corporate survival in the marketplace of the twenty-first century. Leadership must embrace this concept both in theory and practice, and apply it accordingly if organizations are to remain viable. Theory without application is null and void. Therefore, leaders must know the theories, apply them and harness their power to transform their followers into leaders who master the art of networking and fully harness its power.

About the Author

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