

On Leadership: **Contextual Leadership**

By B. Keith Simerson and Michael L. Venn

This, the first in a series of articles on leadership, introduces a framework for effective leadership.

Enron, Arthur Andersen, Imclone, and Global Crossing. Does anything else need to be said about how leadership impacts the business world? Good leadership helps set the stage for success—it helps organizations and their people focus on what’s truly important. Leadership and leaders help establish boundaries, empower the workforce, and provide necessary support.

As developers and coaches of leaders (and as leaders yourself), you can contribute to successful leadership by helping leaders look at their actions through a systemic framework. We are familiar with numerous leadership frameworks, have incorporated their tenets into our thinking, and attempted to put their principles into practice.

Unfortunately, many frameworks are narrowly focused—only useful when playing a narrowly defined role or seeking guidance about a single aspect of leadership. These models help leaders and their organizations some of the time, but not all of the time. Other frameworks are conceptual in nature and therefore more broadly focused—although very interesting to read, they typically offer little or no

practical guidance. Such models are seldom adopted and result in little or no change in leadership behavior.

The challenge is to have a framework broad enough to encompass most, if not all, leadership situations and focused enough to provide practical, useful advice.

How did we create a framework to address this challenge? We unbuttoned our collars, rolled up our sleeves, and (following a Halloween theme) “brewed” one up.

Into our cauldron went existing frameworks, each contributing its own level of credibility and value. Combined, their value and credibility are exponentially increased. Our ingredients included:

- Existing leadership models that present practical advice.
- Leadership models designed, tested, and applied by leaders with whom we have worked.
- Various studies on leadership and management and how they defined leadership actions and activities.
- Practitioner and industry perspectives of what differentiates leadership and management and what one must do to be effective at either or both.
- Landmark research pertaining to talent management, influence and persuasion, and change management.

As we mixed together our "leadership brew," certain images started revealing themselves (for those with inquiring minds, we used an affinity diagram). Nine leadership roles bubbled up. In combination, they address the array of expectations various constituencies have of their leader:

- Custodial Leader – start by making certain your actions contribute to current and future success, end by ensuring what you left behind is better
- Trusted Leader – demonstrate you can be trusted through your actions and how they match your words
- Trusting Leader – show you trust others by allowing them to lead, by sharing your responsibility for success with them
- Nurturing Leader – take ownership of the physical, emotional, and psychological health of the people in your organization
- Strategic Leader – ensure a winning strategy exists in the organization
- Developmental Leader – give people a chance to learn, develop, and contribute in a manner that allows them to achieve their aspirations
- Supportive Leader – make certain people get what they need, when they need it, in a way they can use it
- Inspiring Leader – remind people what they are a part of, how they have succeeded in past situations, and what they can accomplish together
- Working Leader – work side-by-side, help others solve problems, help people distinguish between crises and mere inconveniences

While there is always a risk of Enron-type mismanagement, most leaders want to help teams and organizations succeed. These leaders thirst for knowledge *and* strive for success. The Contextual Leadership Framework helps them translate expectations of followers into actions that drive success. When leaders acknowledge, respond to, and shape the context within which they lead, they are in a better position to:

- *Challenge* the status quo and push critical cultural change throughout the organization.
- *Recognize* and help the organization capitalize on crucial business, market, or industry changes.
- *Align* people behind a key strategy to set the stage for its successful execution.

In our next article, we share the importance of context and how to help a leader focus his or her leadership actions. Subsequent articles explore each role in detail. Until then, send us your comments and reactions. You can e-mail us at Leadership@TradewindsConsulting.com.

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