

On Leadership: The Context of Leadership

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This is the second article in a continuing series of articles on leadership.

Take a deep breath—slowly inhale...hold it...slowly exhale. Now, might we convince you take that same deep breath while sitting at the bottom of a swimming pool? Probably not!

Context is important to survival, personally and professionally. When you hear about a leader being successful in one organization and failing dismally in another, context is frequently the reason. The above example shows that what helps you survive in one context can cause problems, or even be fatal, in another.

Most of us realize that factors such as individual preference, self-motivation, self-confidence, and commitment are important considerations when supervising people. These "personal" factors also exist within a broader context containing many organizational factors and numerous expectations of various stakeholder groups. Factors may combine to help a leader be successful in one environment and then combine differently in another environment to contribute to the same leader being a dismal failure (even while using the same approach and applying the same skills). Add complexity to this reality—these factors are constantly changing—and the key reason for leadership failure becomes increasingly obvious. Contextual leadership helps us understand the importance we must place on these many factors and the varied expectations we must strive to address when attempting to successfully lead an organization.

So what advice does the Contextual Leadership model provide? The nine leadership roles introduced in our first article fall into three categories:

- Earning the Right to Lead (Custodial Leader).
- Key Enablers of Leadership (Trusting Leader, Trusted Leader, Nurturing Leader)

- Critical Drivers of Leadership (Strategic Leader, Developmental Leader, Supportive Leader, Inspiring Leader, Working Leader)

The Critical Drivers of Leadership are the traditional roles that leaders play—crafting strategy, developing people, supporting them in their work, encouraging them to achieve the organization's vision, and getting involved in the details. Which roles you emphasize depend on the context—a context that differs from one organization to another, varies within an organization, and changes over time.

For example, you have recently crafted a new long-term strategy for your organization. You do not wish to duplicate your effort next year; rather, your focus is on implementing the new strategy. To consider context, you ask the following questions. Do people need to develop new skills to implement the strategy? Do they already have the skills, but need to be supported in different ways? Do they need someone working side-by-side with them, establishing and monitoring milestones to make certain everyone is headed in the right direction and is making progress? The answers to these questions describe the context of your organization at a particular point in time. If you get the answers wrong, odds are you will not succeed as a leader.

Unfortunately, if new to the organization, you may get the answers right and still fail! That is, unless you have established the Key Enablers of Leadership. For example, imagine you have worked for an organization for 10 years. In comes a new leader who immediately says, “Everything must change!” What's your initial reaction? Probably, “I don't trust this person. They obviously don't trust me; otherwise, they would assume I am doing the best job I can. Besides, I am obviously a stepping stone for their next career move and they could care less about me.” It is doubtful someone drawing such conclusions will work hard to implement

suggested changes. This demonstrates the importance of one's establishing the Key Enabler roles prior to attempting to move forward with the Critical Driver roles.

We realize this may seem overwhelming. To help, imagine you are in a hostile environment during a moonless night. Countless obstacles—some unseen—may block your progress or cause (possibly severe) injury. Living things are lurking nearby, some waiting to contribute to, or benefit from, your misfortune. (Remind you of today's competitive business environment?)

Consider leadership to be a light shining forth from you and ask yourself, "Where do I need to shine my light?" Should I shine my light into the distance or in front of everyone's feet? Do I need to line up everyone up behind me and shine my light forward? Do I need to help those standing beside and behind me shine forth their leadership lights? In other words, regularly consider the context within which you are leading. Carefully decide which leadership roles and corresponding actions will contribute the most to your organization's success. Decide where you need to shine your light!

Our next article will introduce how one earns the right to lead by exploring the role of Custodial Leader. The lack of this role is what has led to many of the recent leadership failures. Enjoy the holiday season and feel free to contact us at Leadership@TradewindsConsulting.com.

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