

Differences between Leaders and Managers*

Leadership is different than management in that leadership centers around change while management is more interested in getting the present system to work better. Leadership is the development and articulation of vision and empowering people to make the vision happen despite obstacles. Management is about procedures, making sure things are done right, keeping the current system operating through planning, budgeting, organizing, staffing, controlling, and problem solving. Management works through hierarchy, bureaucracy, and systems. It's harder and cooler than leadership. The difference between leadership and management is enormously important and a source of great confusion. While the manager strives to bring change under control, working to get things correctly done, and bringing consistency to chaos, ambiguity, and individual needs, the leader challenges the system, working so the right things are being done in a world of uncertainty and change. Leaders are always disappointing someone and failing as much as succeeding. Instead of insisting there are right and wrong answers and investing energy finding the truth, leaders work more in a child-like sense of curiosity and experimentation.

It's not that leadership is good and management is bad. These approaches are both valuable and have different purposes. It's not enough to simply say the leader wants change and the manager works for the status quo. The manager may want change as well but in the orderly and slow paced direction of tighter controls and enforcing procedures. The leader, on the other hand, is about immediate change without the checks, balances, and details that might insure success. Without management, leaders risk chaos. Without leadership, management becomes entrenched in deadly bureaucracy and often micro-management where control of details and people becomes more important than looking below the surface for immediate and revolutionary change.

The leader often plays the skeptic, challenges the system, and is a risk taker. The way to identify a leader is to look at the arrow marks on their backs as well as the victory wreaths that occasionally appear on their heads. While the manager might also have some wounds from making unpopular decisions, the leader's arrow marks are usually more noticeable and frequent. You can also spot the manager by the person looking forward to the next meeting, strategic planning session, budget review, insisting on a new way to bring order and save money, or never having enough employees to do the work load.

It may be important for all of us to review our leadership and management skills. This insight might lead to recognizing and respecting different styles that contribute to an organization's growth and well being as well as our own skill enhancement. The manager might take more risks and not get bogged down in details and control, while the leader might increase following-up on people and projects. Leaders and managers can learn important organizational skills from one another and they need to respect and adopt to the very different approaches to success.

* Based on John P. Kotter, What Leaders Really Do, Harvard Business School Press, 1999, and Training, June, 1999, pg. 19.