

A Cautionary Tale: The Great Manager Who Was a Bad Leader

by Greg Ford
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Michael was a bright Civil Engineer who worked his way up to the role of Manager, then Director, then finally Vice President. He always excelled in his managerial roles and worked well with all departments. But when the Vice President of Engineering retired, the CEO appointed Michael as the new VP. At first Michael was delighted and dove into his new role with zeal, stepping up his efforts to manage every aspect of the Engineering team. But over time, the culture deteriorated and Michael became frustrated, miserable, and abrupt with his team. Employees sought out Susan, the other Director in the department, to complain about Michael and confess that they were thinking about leaving the company. Susan attempted to be the peacemaker and inspire people toward a common goal, but her efforts were futile.

When the CEO finally had a heart-to-heart conversation with him, Michael admitted he was at a loss. "I'm doing everything the same way I used to," he said. "In fact, I'm working harder than ever to control all the stuff going on, but there's too much for me to manage."

The CEO replied, "That's the problem. You're now supposed to be a leader, not a manager."

"What's the difference?" asked Michael.

In organizations around the world, people are confused about the differences between managing and leading. Executives are making the mistake of promoting or hiring someone into a leadership role because that person has been a good manager in the past. The problem is accelerating now that baby boomers are retiring at a staggering rate and succession planning has become an urgent issue. Managers are being promoted at a rapid rate, without consideration of whether that person is truly right for the organization's role, never mind whether that person will find enjoyment and fulfillment in the position.

The late management expert, Peter Drucker, said that in our current information age and the emergence of the knowledge worker, *"one does not 'manage' people. The task is to lead people."* Drucker's comment about the rise of the knowledge worker is apt. But that statement was made in 2001—fifteen years ago! Since then, it has become important to also factor into the equation the rise of the Millennials who have entered the workforce.

One hundred years ago in the industrial age, workers were content to fulfill the need for food, shelter, and security—the first few levels of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Today, whether we like it or not, Millennials are seeking the promised land of self-esteem and self-actualization. And they're choosing jobs where they feel someone can lead them toward those higher levels of fulfillment.

When we combine these two influences—the Millennials and our new Knowledge Industry economy—it seems that employees these days want to be **led**, not **managed**. Easy, right? Not so fast.

Sometimes a great Manager does possess the same qualities required in a great Leader....but it's rare. Here are the differences:

- A great **Leader** looks to the future, sets vision, inspires people to follow him or her. The Leader is energized by big-picture thinking and is often disinterested in small details. He relies on trust to empower people to execute on the strategy.
- A great **Manager** looks to the present, takes the vision and executes on it. The Manager is energized by planning, organizing, coordinating systems and structures. The Manager relies on control to oversee people and ensure all the work gets done.

Decades of research into benchmarking the characteristics of great leadership reveal the ideal personality profile of a great **Leader**:

1. is highly dominant (usually needs to be in charge)
2. has strong conceptual thinking abilities
3. is highly achievement oriented
4. will challenge status quo
5. can be direct and straightforward
6. may not have a high sense of empathy or sociability

The benchmarked ideal personality profile of a great **Manager**:

1. is moderately dominant (but can willingly accept orders from above)
2. is highly regimented and task-focused
3. will accept status quo
4. possesses empathy and sociability (traits which are more important in a Manager than for a Leader)
5. has a strong sense of urgency

To be certain, some people may naturally be a better fit for a leadership or management role, but that's not to say that other people can't be coached or trained to be more leader-like or manager-like. Gaining self-awareness about your natural strengths and your areas for improvement can be a great first step to helping hone your skills to better fit the job type you are in. Effective leaders are often people who have strengthened and broadened their skills by remaining open-minded to feedback, coaching and training. Tools for gaining self-awareness include a multi-rater 360 Degree Review (offered by many companies) and a reputable personality assessment for executives such as the TalentClick Leadership Profile, the Birkman Method, or the Korn Ferry Assessment of Leadership.

In the true story above, the CEO and Michael eventually agreed that Michael should return to a more hands-on, Director-level role. But they made a bold, progressive move: they announced to the company that they would pay Michael at the same level as a VP, because they valued his contributions at that same level.

Months later, Michael reported that he was energized again, because he was doing what he loved: rolling up his sleeves working on designs and drawings with his team, planning work flow, and ensuring the projects were completed successfully. And morale in the organization improved because the new Vice President, Susan, is letting go of the controls and trusting that her team wants to be led, not managed.

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