



Primal Leadership

An evolutionary view of what followers want

Competent leadership is paramount to success; businesses with strong leadership are 13 times more likely to outperform their competition, and three times more likely to retain their most talented employees. Yet, research suggests that half of all current executives will eventually derail.

Why do so many fail, and what do followers really want from leaders?

For 2.5 million years of hunter-gatherer living, human social conditions were fundamentally egalitarian, with no formal leadership roles. When leaders did emerge, it was to solve tough adaptive problems that threatened the group's ability to survive and reproduce.

The ability of these individuals to mandate collective action depended on their being accepted by the rest of the group. In this way the real power in early human groups did not reside in a dominant alpha, but rather among the group members who collectively gave the leader power by choosing to follow – as long as it made sense to do so.

The Needs of the Group

Of all the problems they had to overcome, three in particular reflect the major, recurring threats to the survival of early human groups that were best solved by social coordination and a rational leader-follower structure.

The first of the three major problems occurred when a band had to move to new foraging grounds, locate water, or seek shelter. How would a group decide where to go and how to get there? Group coordination, where a trusted and competent individual took the initiative and others chose to go along, proved to be the most effective solution. Leadership charted a course, and followership was required for the group to get there.

The second problem that leadership solves concerns peacekeeping and enforcing group norms and codes of conduct. The survival of a band depended on individuals pulling their own weight; free-riders undermined the viability of the group. Someone needed to either deter or sanction free-riding when

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it occurred. Peacekeeping offered a niche for individuals brave enough to enforce the rules and intervene before conflicts consumed the band.

The third problem that threatened group survival was bands of invaders intent on taking the group's resources. Individuals who were skilled at coordinating group defense and organizing proactive campaigns and who were fierce and aggressive in the face of enemies would benefit the whole group. Recall the surge in approval ratings for George W. Bush after 9/11; when faced with mortal danger, people more readily defer to a central command and their preference for democratic leadership is markedly reduced.

The Needs of the Individual

Moving from the group level to the individual level, three fundamental needs, rooted in biology, are inevitable by-products of group living and are key to the survival of individuals:

1. Getting along with other group members
2. Gaining status within the group
3. Making sense out of the world

The most basic fact of collective psychology as humans is that we are highly social; belonging is a fundamental human motive. All primate societies have elaborate rules and rituals that enable group members to live together. Transgressing these rules and rituals and not getting along with others almost inevitably led to exclusion, which meant death in our evolutionary history.

Second, all primate groups have status hierarchies, and higher status individuals typically have better lives than their low-status counterparts do. Although getting along is crucial for individual survival, obtaining status in the group – getting ahead – promotes reproductive success. For example, high-status hunters among the Yanamomo tribes of the Amazon River basin have two to three times as many offspring than do less-respected tribesmen. Yet there are substantial individual differences in the degree to which individuals want to compete or advance. Some people are content just to belong, whereas others want to move up the chain.

Finally, all human societies have some form of religion or cultural belief system. Belief systems provide a sense of purpose in life and a sense of control over seemingly random and unpredictable events.

Why Leaders Fail

The three tough problems that reflect forces acting on groups and the three fundamental needs of individuals provide a key to understanding what followers want – and don't want.

Humans lived throughout most of their existence in egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies with no formal chiefs or rulers. Leadership was exercised by individuals who could persuade the group, based on their reputations for judgment, integrity, expertise, and contributions to the greater good; but these people had no power to impose their will on others.

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This evolutionary resistance to tyranny is reflected in modern business. Leadership that produces voluntary commitment is best for engaging followers; dominance may produce compliance, but at the cost of alienation and resentment. Participative management, empowerment, and decentralized decision-making tend to improve employee morale and attitudes, which are linked to greater productivity, customer satisfaction, and financial results.

Also, early humans were fiercely egalitarian – they lacked the resources to provide a disproportionately comfortable living for a leader. In modern America, the average CEO salary is 280 times that of the typical worker. Employees deeply resent leaders who receive perks that are unearned.

Finally, leadership is not always needed in human affairs. Employees resent leadership when it is not needed; they resist too-close supervision, especially when the task is simple and routine and they are competent at it.

Driving Commitment

History demonstrates that followers mostly want to be left alone to decide how to go about their work. However, under the right circumstances, people effortlessly adopt leader-follower patterns.

- Direction, when they aren't sure of the path forward, such as during times of disruptive change
- Peacemaking, when there is discord and free-riding within the group
- Protection, when threatened by competition, the environment, or bad luck

Also, leaders can connect with individual followers by providing answers to the three deep needs at the core of human nature.

1. A sense of meaning and purpose in their work lives
2. A sense of belonging to a larger group or community
3. Opportunities to feel safe and to get ahead and improve their lot

Finally, followers are more receptive to leaders who are both competent and generous. They are less receptive to people who are talented but selfish or generous but unskilled.

These preferences are written into the human genetic code and form the basic human orientation to leadership; they are ignored at a leader's peril.

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