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Interactive Leadership: a guide to successful management relations

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Three reasons to arrive at a new vision for leadership

One closer look at today’s modern working life shows: There are (at least) three really good reasons to rethink the principles of leadership.

1. Active participation is key in future organizations
Flat hierarchies and clearly defined chains of command are key conditions for innovation and long-term success. One of the factors driving this process is the ongoing development in information technology: Digital channels running through mobile devices, collaboration and knowledge platforms as well as social media have rendered communication within a company both much faster and more transparent.

2. The young workforce needs to be convinced
Generation Y, they are between 25 and 30 years old and make up roughly 20% of Germany’s labor force: Their expectations when it comes to the working environment and the leadership scenario are distinctively different from those of past generations. Acting self-responsibly, working in small teams and a culture of open dialog are some of their key demands.

3. The days of the hero are a thing of the past
For the supposedly omniscient leader the bell has tolled. Today we know: To continue with exemplary leadership attributes is not helping. Simply because no leader has the capacity to fulfill them in its entirety. In this context, management mastermind Peter M. Senge has labeled the term “incomplete leader”. In stark contrast to the “incompetent leader” they are fully aware of their own shortcomings and they know that they can only benefit from the expertise and experience of their co-workers.

When leadership research actually discovers those who are being led

Time to take a closer look at the history of leadership theory. **Leader-based theories** marked the beginning. To determine ideal leadership behavior a target profile is defined, leaders are essentially the drivers of values and visions that shape the motivation of those who follow. However, the theories do not take the complexity of organizational processes and structures into account. Something of a problem, since a number of different factors contributing to the company’s success are only marginally influenced by the leader.
Relationship-based theories have focused more on the relationship between leader and follower. They analyze and describe the conditions and behavioral aspects that are crucial for successful interaction between the two. Recently, the focus has shifted towards more attention on those who are being led. Follower-based theories concentrate on the skills of the employee. The core idea: The follower contributes significantly to leadership quality by proactively sharing their views and self-confidently articulating their needs.

Interactive Leadership: the best of two worlds

Interactive leadership looks at the subject from a new perspective. Both leader and follower are at the center of attention, attitudes and interactions between the two are analyzed. Leader and follower meet on equal terms to share their respective points of view openly. By doing so, they equally share responsibility in the leadership process and thus contribute mutually to the team and company success.

By no means will the vital role of the leader be diminished. Quite the contrary, the leadership process is enhanced by the follower’s perspective, a contribution that is beneficial to both sides and therefore advantageous for the company:

— By sharing responsibilities leaders feel less strained. They benefit from an improved communication and team culture. Plus, having everybody involved in acting more self-reliant, will generate better results from the team as a whole.

— By becoming part of the decision-making process the follower’s position is strengthened. Hierarchical barriers are reduced; decision-making becomes faster and more transparent.

— The company can build upon an enhanced communication structure. On top of that, by implementing a more sustainable form of organization, the company ensures its long-term viability.

New rights, new obligations

Everybody involved in the process needs be clear about one thing: For this, rethinking is key, new requirements will need to be addressed – from both sides. Leaders will have to foster stronger relations with their followers, having an open dialog and accepting the opinions of others. Followers in turn have to demonstrate the mindset to participate actively in the decision-making process.

Interactive Leadership at work

For a number of years, fgi has extensively researched the implications of a new approach in leadership understanding. Recently, we have successfully managed the implementation of an interactive leadership program within a larger service providing company. Generally, the renewed leadership relations are developed in five steps:

1. Changing is comprehending: the new understanding

The initial step marks the mutual understanding of how future leadership relations within the company are to be shaped. The added-value elements of this new approach need to be communicated from the top executives to their respective leadership teams.
2. Making the invisible tangible: the diagnostics
The current state of leadership relations will be made transparent by a so-called responsibility barometer. A questionnaire with clearly defined areas of actions will help supply crucial data about how leaders and followers assess the present leadership relation situation. This will help to detect those areas where the potential for change is most promising.

3. The heart of the matter: the dialog
“Interactive Leadership” is the title of a daylong, moderated workshop. Here, leaders and followers openly discuss everything concerning Leadership Transition. The primary focus is on team interaction and the specific objectives of the new leadership approach. (For more detail, please read the following interview with Katinka Schulz.)

4. The compass for the steps ahead: the commitments
Leaders and followers develop the follow-up steps that will eventually lead to a permanent change within the leadership relations of the team, including the necessary intermediate stops and success criteria.

5. Maintaining leadership relations: the monitoring
The team members periodically evaluate the status quo of their practiced leadership relations. For this, the playing field analysis model with the two modules “topics of discussion” and “relationship quality” has proven highly beneficial.

Many roads lead to Rome
Depending on the organizational structure and the company’s needs the program “Interactive Leadership” can be implemented in different ways.

One way is to introduce the program via the cascade principle. The first meetings are arranged for high-ranking sounding groups. Executives and co-workers will subsequently be informed in internal kick-offs. Only then the actual “Interactive Leadership” workshops commence in their respective units. For companies with fast network structures voluntary teams can lead by example. Generally, the stimulus of these lighthouses have a huge symbolic impact on the rest of the company.

“Interactive Leadership” can also be utilized as a separate HR-instrument: The workshop enriches the classic management feedback – with its usual focus on the executive – by extending it to a dialog about leadership in general.

Conclusion
When it comes to shaping organizations for the future, Interactive Leadership makes an indispensable contribution. Plus: Once you have experienced open dialog and active shaping of leadership relations you will never want to go back.

The authors
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In pursuit of the “moments of truth”

Psychologist Katinka Schulz is one of the consultants here at fgi. She specializes in the field of leadership and team strategies in changing and challenging environments. In the past few years, she has moderated numerous workshops titled “Interactive Leadership”.

Mrs. Schulz, just prior to each workshop you have an extensive conversation with the respective executive. What are the most prominent impressions from those interviews?

Leading up to the workshop I experience a whole array of emotions: Some leaders are truly looking forward to an open dialog with their co-workers. Others are much more skeptical when it comes to a more democratic approach within the relation of each team. Some actually fear there might be tensions at the workshop.

At the workshop, what is the actual experience like for both leaders and followers?

For many teams – especially those at top management positions – it is the first time that they are openly discussing their interactions. How much added value do our meetings currently have? Is the feedback precise enough for the followers to be meaningful? How much need for dialog does a leader have? But also the relationship between each team member is a topic of discussion.

What kind of commitments are agreed upon?

It is crucial that both sides are mutually encouraged to commit to something. Both leaders and followers are equally responsible for the communication between them to be constructive and thus successful. We strongly advise teams not to overachieve at the beginning. Because for every goal that needs to be reached mandatory steps are to be defined. To be more specific, many teams agree to not only address company related issues but also make room for personal opinions and points of view. Others develop tangible rules for mutual feedback.

The key to the Program of Interactive Leadership is …

… for sure the openness that prevails in those workshops. Team members do not shy away from sharing their thoughts about their relationships in the team. Interactive Leadership assumes that everybody involved is willing to change their perspective. In order to get to what we call “the moments of truth” followers muster up their courage to admit that their superior’s secretiveness causes them distress.

Leaders feel relief when they discuss difficult decisions within the team prior to actually initiating them. When both sides assume responsibility for their relationship it allows for leaders to have the appropriate space to communicate their inhibitions. Followers in turn sense that they contribute solutions based on their own initiative. They feel they are partners on equal terms – what could possibly be more motivating?

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