Putting Self-Esteem First

By Joseph L. Curtin

In organizations of any sort, there always has been a need for leadership. People always have wanted leaders, and leaders repeatedly have solicited followers. This reciprocal relationship continues, however, without an explicit, widely accepted definition of leadership. Personality, behavioral, and situational/contingency theories abound, as well as academic exercises laboring on the distinction between leadership and management.

The formula for leadership offered in this article differs somewhat from the popular approach. Its emphasis is on a leader's various levels of security, and his or her consequent status as an empowering or depowering manager. The formula incorporates the aspects of management that create a substantive definition of leadership.

In addition to the formula, this article provides a case for values as a source of motivation, characteristics of empowering leaders and depowering managers, and a process for organization development consultants that creates effective leadership change.

The formula

Even though this formula is set up like a mathematical equation, it is not intended to be literally quantitative. Rather, the mathematical format is merely a tool for clarifying the components of a fundamental concept. The equation starts with potential and ends with effectiveness:

Security Level + Intensity of
   Mission = Leader Potential
Leader Potential + Leader
   Support = Leader Power
Leader Power + Follower Self-Esteem
   Enhancement = Leadership
Follower Commitment to
   Leader = Leadership Effectiveness

As you can see, my definition of leadership is the ability to enhance the self-esteem of followers. To achieve that, one must start out with a basis of security. Let's examine some of the elements in the equation.

Security

To begin with, a leader's security level is measured by his or her degree of self-awareness and self-acknowledgment. Self-awareness is the degree of self-knowledge leaders possess. How well do they view themselves? How well do they think others perceive them? To what extent are they aware of how their unique personalities were developed? Which specific individuals affected their formative years? Why was that impact important? Why do they value what they do? Leaders need to answer these types of questions in order to know themselves. To the degree these inquiries are unanswered, the leader is blind; and the greater the blindness, the less the security level.

Self-acknowledgment is the other sub-element of the security level. Leaders may increase their security by acknowledging who they are and how they came to think and act as they do. They look on themselves and their history without condemnation, guilt, or fear.

The greater the security level, the greater is the leader's capacity and inclination to empower followers. The lower the security level, the greater is his or her need to seek power, to make followers dependent and docile.

Intensity of mission

Intensity of mission—the other element of leader potential—is made up of two sub-elements: identification with the purpose of the organization and the motivation to achieve that purpose. Identification with the purpose is the degree of belief leaders have that the organization's mission is an expression of themselves. Does the purpose of the organization make the leader feel proud and fulfilled as a human being? To the extent that the answer to this question is positive, leaders will increase their intensity of mission through intrinsic satisfaction.

Motivation to achieve organizational purpose is a complex interaction of changing values, philosophy of life, physical energy, age, and growth needs. This how-bad-do-I-want-it feeling comes more from the individual than from any organizational stimulus.

Leader support

In the formula, leader support combines with the element of leader potential to form leader power. Leader support depends on whether the leader's immediate supervisor encourages the leader's security and whether the supervisor gives the leader authority to achieve organizational objectives.

It stands to reason that leader support is ultimately a function of the CEO's own security level. In every organization with which I have consulted, I have found this to be true. Secure CEOs with low intensity-of-mission levels can empower their followers with the authority and the encouragement to increase self-awareness and self-acknowledgment. But I have yet to meet the insecure CEO who allowed any significant degree of leader support. For this reason, dependent, depowering managers stay with insecure CEO's, while independent, empowering leaders leave .

Enhancing follower self-esteem

Leader potential and leader power throughout any organization are functions of the CEO's security level. To the extent CEOs are secure, they will use leader power for the purpose of enhancing the self-esteem of followers— my definition of leadership and the third part of the equation. The secure CEO wants independent followers who in turn empower others. The insecure CEO uses leader power to make subordinates dependent to satisfy the need to have power over others.

No matter what the definition of leadership, leadership effectiveness is the degree of follower commitment to

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the leader, not commitment to an organization or its goals. The measure of leadership ultimately and simply is determined by answering the question "Did the followers follow a leader?" The measure of management is the answer to "Did the followers follow an organization, and did that organization succeed?" In behavioral terms, leadership effectiveness is effectiveness of person, while management effectiveness is effectiveness of system.

Motivation

If leadership effectiveness is follower commitment to a leader, how do leaders elicit that commitment? The foundation of that answer begins with motivation.

Ever since Abraham Maslow introduced his hierarchy of needs, many motivational theorists have advocated leadership techniques that addressed employee needs. Indeed, this approach might work, if values did not come into play. The reality is that needs do not become a source of motivation until they become a value.

Do leaders motivate followers? Of course not. Followers already have a source of motivation—their own value systems. A value system is an ordering of values that represent an expression of a follower's physical and mental security. Let us use Maslow's Needs as an example.

Maslow proposed that once people satisfied their need for love, they would then be motivated to satisfy the need for esteem. In terms of values, however, this order of motivation might be reversed; indeed, love and esteem might be valued equally or be one and the same. In addition, values give definition to needs, such as love and esteem: what constitutes love in one person may be esteem as perceived by another. Finally, the purpose of all values is security, be it physical or mental. If esteem more than love is believed to be essential to physical or mental security, esteem will be valued more and consequently exchange places with love on the hierarchy of needs.

Of the values important to human physical and mental security, self-esteem yields the greatest potential for building follower commitment to the leader. Leaders who empower attempt to elevate the value of self-esteem within the value systems of followers. Depowering managers either disregard or attack follower self-esteem.

Empowering versus depowering

Managers who depower may achieve employee allegiance to the systems of an organization and may also achieve positive bottom-line results. These managers, however, achieve those ends at the cost of leadership. In essence, the dependent employees who stay with the depowering manager foster the hope that he or she will leave and be replaced by someone better. All things being equal, employees would not choose to work for a depowering manager a second time; very few people genuinely desire to have a manager attack or disregard their self-esteem.

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Are managers who depower aware of their effect on subordinates? Yes and no. On one hand, depowering managers often know that they are not respected by their employees. On the other, these managers rarely know on a conscious level what behavior on their part evokes either negative or positive employee reactions, or why. And why should a depowering manager care at all?

Depowering managers in most organizations are rewarded for their impact, as long as they achieve short-term, bottom-line results and conform to the depowering expectations of their bosses and the corporate culture. Provided that top management's strategy is sound in the marketplace, and the quality level of the product or service is tolerable, these depowering organizations will survive and, possibly, excel.

In contrast, leaders who empower try to do the following:
- learn their follower's value systems;
- acknowledge those same value systems;
- enhance follower self-esteem through values modification.

Will any of the behaviors above result in greater performance? Possibly. The measure of leadership effectiveness, however, is not the performance of followers but the ability to gain and maintain a following.

Leaders who empower not only know what values motivate their followers and acknowledge those values, but also attempt to enhance the particular value of self-esteem. As Maslow stated in *Psychological Review* (Vol. 50, 1943), "All people in our society have a need or desire for. . . self-esteem. . . soundly based upon . . . the desire for strength, for achievement, for adequacy, for confidence in the face of the world, and for independence and freedom."

The degree of follower commitment to a leader is in direct proportion to the degree the leader influences followers to feel good about themselves. This is tied to performance only insofar as a follower's self-esteem is tied to performance. If self-esteem is closely linked to performance, an empowering leader would make every effort to structure the situation to enable the follower to perform at a level satisfactory to the follower.

Generally speaking, empowering leaders are secure within themselves while depowering managers are less so. Empowering leaders know who they are. They
- know how they came to be mentally;
- acknowledge where they are;
- are relatively free from guilt, fear, and condemnation;
- possess inner harmony;
- exhibit consistent behavior;
- subordinate their ego to the mission;
- know others and accept them as individuals;
- attract followers with as much self-esteem as possible;
- and, of course, are motivated to empower others.

Depowering managers to varying degrees do not know who they are nor possess any of the above characteristics.

There is little evidence to indicate that empowering leaders make more money for themselves or their organizations than depowering ones. In fact, in many instances the reverse may be true. As long as a manager has dependent subordinates, technological innovation, capital, and marketing advantage at his or her disposal, he or she may have economic prosperity forever.

Here is, however, one brilliant example of an empowering leader who reaped great dividends for himself and his organization. Thomas J. Watson, Jr., hailed by *Fortune* on August 31, 1987

as "the greatest capitalist in history," retired from IBM in 1971 after 15 years as its CEO. During those years, *Fortune* reported, the company's stock was worth $36 billion more than it was when he took over. One of his three company cornerstones concerned self-esteem. In the 1984 book, *The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America*, Watson stated, "Our early emphasis on human relations was not motivated by altruism but by the simple belief that if we respected our people and helped them respect themselves the company would make the most profit."

And how did Watson follow through on this assumption? According to *Fortune*, Watson said he was able "to pick strong and intelligent men"—a mark of his self-esteem—"and then hold the team together"—a mark of leadership effectiveness—"by persuasion, by apologics, by financial incentives, by speeches, by thoughtfulness when they were sick or involved in accidents, and by using every tool at my command to make that team think that I was a decent guy." He used leader power to appeal to follower values and to signal followers that they were worthy of his care and concern.

Contrast Watson's empowering leadership with that of Henry Ford II's depowering management while at Ford Motor Company. "I was fired for being a threat to the boss," Chrysler turn-around hero Lee Iacocca stated in his 1984 book *Iacocca*. "Henry was infamous for dropping his number two men. . . . To him, it was always the uprising of the peasants against their lord and master. . . . Early in my presidency, Henry told me. . . 'If a guy works for you . . . always do the opposite of what he expects. Keep your people anxious and off-balance'." Obviously, Henry Ford II wanted power over others. The current chairman of Ford, Donald Petersen, has tried to turn that philosophy, and the company, around. His empowering leadership style is reflected in Ford's participative management and employee involvement efforts. (See the article in the August 1988 *Training & Development Journal*.)

Surely Ford's depowering management style is the rule, and Watson's empowering leadership is the exception. Yet, if our society continues to mature at its current rate, the workplace will be forced to respond to the evergrowing demand for empowering leadership. How might organization development consultants respond to that demand and use the leadership formula to assist clients and their organizations in achieving empowering leadership?

Instrumentation

Regardless of the degrees of leader potential and power within an organization, OD consultants must identify the current perception of leadership in the enterprise. This perception can be defined using interviews, internal document reviews, or questionnaires, but the consultant should employ a tool agreed to by the organization's members. I prefer multiple-question, agree-disagree surveys because they have quantitative advantages, and the data control is easy.

Here are some statements, for example, the responses to which can yield a leadership index:

■ My supervisor communicates with me in a way that makes me feel good about myself.

■ My supervisor is sincerely pleased when I do a good job and immediately tells me so.

■ My supervisor sincerely considers any suggestion I propose for improved performance.

■ Merely being around my supervisor makes me feel powerful.

■ My supervisor genuinely cares about me and my co-workers.

■ I would give my supervisor an A grade in leadership ability.

Everyone in the organization must participate in the survey, including the CEO. The CEO's participation is absolutely necessary: if leadership change is the project and the CEO won't take the survey, the OD consultant is squandering the client's time and money.

The results are reported to all participants. That requires much courage on their part, but from such courage and security are empowering leaders born and positively reinforced. The stage is then set for leadership change.

Leadership change

The OD consultant then works with both depowering managers and empowering leaders—as identified by the surveys—to define their personal value systems. Reasons for both the existence and the ranking of value priorities are discussed with each manager individually. This is known as the values clarification process.

During the values clarification process or upon its completion, the values

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modification process begins. During values modification, the OD consultant attempts to elevate the personal value of self-esteem within the value systems of leaders and managers. Can this often lengthy process be successful?

The answer is yes, *if* a sufficient amount of dissatisfaction exists with the current level of self-esteem. If such dissatisfaction does not exist, the OD consultant might choose to create that level of dissatisfaction; in sports-coaching parlance, the consultant may opt to "tear down" depowering managers in order to "build them up again" to be stronger than before.

How does the OD consultant do this? By challenging—in verbal, visual, or experiential fashion—the personal values that have higher priority in managers than the value of self-esteem. Though the process of "tearing down" may seem an anathema to the principle of self-esteem, the consultant's goal is to assist managers and leaders in raising self-esteem to the highest level within their value systems; in my opinion, the ends justify the means. Certainly, it is a time-comsuming and nearly impos-sible task in respect to depowering managers. Some depowering managers may, in fact, choose to leave the organization during this process to join other organizational cultures that are more consistent with their value systems.

Ethics

Is values modification, particularly using this process, ethical? Is creating what is essentially a personal values crisis worth the benefits of leadership?

My experience has taught me that people will follow a leader in spite of personal costs, if the leader is perceived as acting in the best interests of the followers. I have yet to meet the follower who was not drawn to the leader who enhanced the follower's self-esteem. This indicates to me that deep in each of us is a self-esteem value that drives us to leaders who not only acknowledge that value, but also actually enhance it.

If potential leaders are willing to take the kind of courageous risks necessary to elevate their own value of self-esteem, they will be more than able to weather the personal storms such efforts require. They will do so as long as they believe in the integrity and ability of the OD consultant.

My concern is not so much that CEOs, managers, and leaders will have an ethical problem with the process, but rather that OD consultants themselves will have the courage and leader potential to market and implement this process successfully—first to the CEOs who are already empowering leaders and second to the depowering CEOs who will no doubt follow suit at a later time. The depowering CEOs will realize the most dramatic change within their organizations.

Robert Tannenbaum, the co-author of the classic 1958 *Harvard Business Review* article, "How to Choose a Leadership Pattern," addressed the Los Angeles Organization Development Network in September 1985 and stated, "For fundamental change to occur, OD consultants must hang in there with people being willing and able to tap, release, and work through their powerful feelings." Are we as OD consultants worthy of the challenge issued by Tannenbaum and this values modification process that answers his call?