

What is the difference between management and leadership?

I ask this question as an “ice-breaker” whenever I am teaching a class on leadership to grad school students. I use the question to get the students engaged and (hopefully) get their creative juices flowing. My question is not anecdotal—I call on at least five students every class to share their thoughts. I also assure them that I am not looking for a textbook definition, I just want to see what they think.

Some students take an easy path. Since they know that I am there to discuss leadership, they make an argument that management is “bad,” while leadership is “good.” When somebody inevitably goes in that direction, I remind them that some of history’s most effective leaders have been truly evil people: leadership is neither inherently good nor bad.

Others students say things like: “you manage things, but you lead people.” That answer makes sense to me. Others will say: “management is about maximizing the use of resources, while leadership is about inspiration.” I have also heard: “there is no difference. Management and leadership are really the same thing.”

After I’ve been successful in getting a real discussion going, I share my thoughts, and it usually goes something like this: “I’ve been thinking about this for a long time and I’ve tried to make it as simple as I can. In its simplest form, management is just making stuff happen. Leadership is influencing people to make stuff happen. You can add complexity to the definition with all sorts of qualifiers ranging from organizational goals to vision, but the key idea is this: people may be part of any management situation, but they are THE critical component of any leadership equation. At its core, leadership is about people and relationships.”

Wise leaders understand this idea and do everything they can to understand themselves and others. Better understanding leads to an increased potential for influence. Who do you need to consider in your relationships? They include the sales clerk and the guy in the back who does not talk to customers but whose technical skills are critical for the business. They include the CEO and the janitorial staff. If you are in business, both your stockholders and your customers are certainly worthy of consideration. I’m currently involved with a couple of state conservation agencies and I’ve found that it is critical to listen to all who have an interest in a particular subject: scientists, ranchers, hunters, environmentalists.

I once worked for a guy who was a good manager but a poor leader. He certainly made things happen. His toxic style was effective in getting results in the short term, but his influence was really only effective if he was present and threatening others. Contrast that with another leader I worked for (at the same level) who was one of the most effective leaders I have ever seen. He easily communicated with both the PhD holders and the blue collar staff. He worked hard to understand how others communicated, and how best to influence them. The results spoke for themselves. We were all part of a coherent team and we fought to do our best. Frankly, we did not want to let the leader down.

We were inspired to strive for excellence and we regularly attained it. Most importantly, our leader influenced us every day, even if he was not around.

The next time you face a tough leadership challenge, think about the people you are trying to lead: what is their perspective? What motivates them? In order to achieve the desired effect, how can I best reach them? Once you have that understanding, plan your move and do it, realizing that the best technique for one group in one setting may fail in another context. This is why leadership is an art, as well as a science. The master leadership artists understand the criticality of people and relationships.