Creative Leadership

Many writers and scholars have attempted to define and study both leadership and creativity, yet there are no universal definitions of either concept. If creativity is the making and communicating of meaningful new connections, and leadership can be approached as an influence process, then creative leadership is that kind of influence process that results in meaningful, new connections.

Historically, the study of leadership was initially approached single-dimensionally—the search for the traits and characteristics of great leaders. This was followed by two-dimensional approaches that examined leadership style as a blend of concern for people with a concern for tasks. More recently, the study of leadership has taken a multidimensional approach—including leader-member exchanges, relationships, contingency, and situational theories.

When one considers innovation, transformation, and growth, the kinds of challenges managers and leaders face require creativity. The tasks tend to be more ambiguous, ill defined, or fuzzy rather than clearly structured or well defined. The potential solutions and ways of solving them tend to be complex, unknown, or untested rather than known, predetermined, or simple. This situation demands creativity—the making and communicating of something new and useful.

Creative leadership is an inclusive influence process in which the leader functions as a catalyst for navigating change along its full spectrum. This conception of creative leadership includes behaviors related to both leading and managing.

There is a great deal of debate and tension between the roles of leader and manager. Leading seems to be focused on the future and on all the strategically important things, whereas management is seen as merely dealing with day-to-day maintenance functions. These distinctions between leading and managing are interesting and important, but only insofar as they encourage mindfulness. If the distinctions breed the outright discounting of management, then organizations will necessarily see creativity as linked only to leading and not to managing.

Rather than having one best style, approach, or answer, the leader must have the capacity for great flexibility in behavior. This flexibility includes being aware of the factors in the situation, including the general orientation of the people involved in the task, the nature of the desired outcomes, the context or culture surrounding the task, and the method being applied. In short, the creative leader must work together with constituents to invent meaningful and new responses to many, varied, and unique situations, demands, and challenges. This increased range of behaviors applies to concern for task as well as for people and transforms the traditional role of the leader.

The skills and abilities required for creative leadership are rather broad. Recent research by Michael Mumford and colleagues has identified that creative leaders must be able to define problems and missions that are worth pursuing, and they must also create a work environment that enables generating and transforming ideas into action.

The model for creative leadership integrates what is known about leadership, creativity, and change and

contains three basic dimensions: a focus on tasks, a focus on people, and a concern for change (see Figure 1).

Change occurs on a continuous spectrum ranging from total and continuous change on the one end, and moving toward no change on the other. The spectrum of change entails the full range, from evolution to revolution. Using this spectrum of change, the full range of creative leadership can be better understood.

Creative leadership includes management competencies, leadership practices and strategies, and leading at the edge of chaos. The situation and needs determine where one is on the change spectrum, and therefore the most appropriate default position for behavior. Leaders and managers must be able to use a variety of styles and behaviors that are contextualized to fit the interaction of people and tasks.

Ensuring the appropriate management competencies are present can assist creative leadership within a relatively stable situation, one that is lower on the change spectrum. Well-established managerial competencies like searching for and processing information, concept formation, conceptual flexibility, managing interaction, oral presentation ability, and the like, would seem to be sufficient for making improvements and modifications within a relatively stable environment.
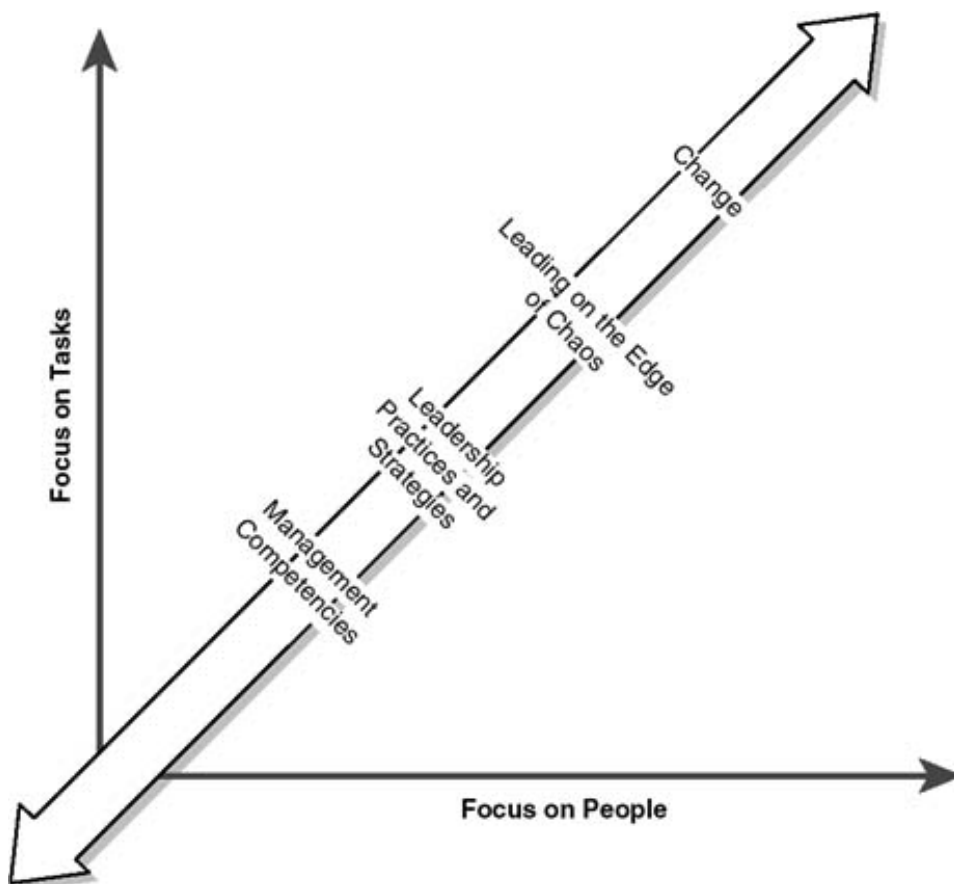
Figure 1 The Full Spectrum of Leadership Behavior

Source: The Creative Problem Solving Group, Inc. Reproduced by permission.

Rather than minimizing or marginalizing management, this approach recognizes that creative change can and does occur here. New policies and procedures are developed and implemented. Improved planning and control procedures are often put in place that more effectively integrate people and tasks. Creative leadership also occurs here as very dramatic and significantly useful changes can bring new ways of making the current system run more efficiently and effectively. Providing effective management and introducing appropriate change that focuses on improving existing products, services, and processes establishes the foundation and resources for making more radical changes.

Creative leadership is often related to accomplishing extraordinary results, outcomes that are both new and useful. Leadership practices and strategies are patterns of behaviors that help people in teams and organizations to do more than function well within a stable system. These behaviors help people to create and deal with a range of change, including making major new improvements for existing lines of work to creating entirely new lines of business.

The very high end of the change spectrum has been likened to white water, turbulent times, and the edge of chaos. There is an emerging view among those who write about life in today's organizations that traditional and established views of leadership may not be sufficient for dealing with the future. Our concepts of leadership are being influenced by the new sciences that challenge the 17th-century's mechanistic view of the world.

At the high end of the change spectrum, the need is for high levels of performance within the entire system of people, outcome, method, and place. The full spectrum of leading and managing is needed in order to create organizations that will be versatile and nimble. The kind of creative leadership discussed here illustrates the need for building these capacities and potentials into the very fabric of organizations and has important implications for those charged with the development of future leaders.

—Scott G. Isaksen

Further Readings

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