

What Lies Ahead for Leadership?

by Ellen Peebles

*(Editor's note: This post concludes a six-week blog series on **how leadership might look in the future**. The conversations generated by these posts will help shape the agenda of a symposium on the topic in June 2010, hosted by HBS's **Nitin Nohria, Rakesh Khurana, and Scott Snook**.)*

Six weeks ago, Harvard Business School professor Scott Snook (along with his colleagues Nitin Nohria and Rakesh Khurana) launched an online conversation on the nature of leadership. They invited top scholars and practitioners in the field to talk about our traditional assumptions and practices and how and whether they hold up in a new era — one shaped by modern warfare, severe economic pressures, natural disasters, rapidly changing technology, and some eyebrow-raising ethical choices. If the old models are broken, then what should replace them? They asked these experts, in other words, to imagine the future of leadership. We received 33 posts, each representing a thoughtful, enlightened point of view. As the editor for the series I'll mention a few themes that came through, but urge you to visit the rest of the series for more.

A few contributors took on the great-man model, arguing that it's no longer relevant or particularly effective. HBS professor Bill George, for instance, said that the hierarchical model "simply doesn't work anymore." Knowledge workers don't respond to top-down leadership. Barbara Kellerman, from Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, argued forcefully against what she called the "abiding tyranny of the male leadership model." In the U.S., she says, "so far as leadership is concerned, women in nearly every realm are nearly nowhere — hardly any better off than they were a generation ago." HBS's Linda Hill wrote about "leading from behind," a phrase she borrowed from Nelson Mandela.

We had a couple of posts about the simple art of paying attention. Harry Spence from Harvard's Kennedy School, for instance, pointed to the danger of leaders unconsciously betraying their organizations thanks to personal agendas they're not even aware they hold. Ellen Langer, a psychology professor at Harvard, wrote a thoughtful piece about "mindfulness" — actively noticing events and people. She cited a study of orchestra musicians who were instructed to be either mindless or mindful. That is, they were to replicate a previous performance with which they were very satisfied or make the piece new in very subtle ways that only they would know. Audiences unaware of the instructions listened to taped performances and greatly preferred the mindful versions (the players liked them better too).

Another series of posts focused on leadership development. Trina Soske (from Oliver Wyman Leadership Development) and Jay Conger (Claremont McKenna College), for example, argued that companies aren't getting their money's worth with classroom efforts and that development projects should be focused squarely on real business problems. Daisy Wademan Dowling, an author and leadership development executive, and MasterCard International's Matthew Breitfelder proposed that companies take a page from the Peace Corps, sending employees to volunteer across geographic boundaries. William Sullivan, from The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, argued for bringing leadership development and a sense of professionalism to

undergraduate education, rather than starting with business schools.

Bloggers also wrote about leaders they particularly admire. HBS's Michael Beer chose Becton, Dickinson Company CEO Ed Ludwig, who is rare in his openness to truly honest conversations; Frances Frei, also from HBS, chose Suze Orman as a leader who defies the "standards/empathy" tradeoff; their colleague Sandra Sucher pointed to Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as an exemplar of "moral leadership in action."

On the subject of cultural distinctions and diversity, Lan Liu from Peking University's Center for China Strategic Studies argued for a more cultural-specific way of looking at leadership, and Mansour Javidan, from the Thunderbird School of Global Management laid out the concept of a global mindset.

Many others sent us terrific posts, and I wish I could describe them all, but we're hoping that you'll browse through the series. The contributors are getting together later this week to further the discussion, with the blog posts as jumping off points to set the agenda. Meanwhile, I recently found this link to a powerful video that Nitin Nohria created about a year ago (with Amanda Pepper and XPLANE), on this very subject: It's fun to watch, but also loaded with information and ideas.

Thanks to everyone who participated in this series. Now I'll let you get back to imagining the future of leadership.

Ellen Peebles is a senior editor with the Harvard Business Review Group. She was the editor for the HBS Imagining the Future of Leadership blog series.

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