



Leading When You Are Not in Charge

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If you ever find yourself in the position of leading when you are not in charge, then probably the following events have taken place in advance:

1. The person who is in charge is a bad leader or, just as bad, a weak leader.
2. The situation has become intolerable and you find you must do something or incur losses.
3. The “in charge” position carries with it authority to hire, fire, recommend, compensate or withhold compensation. The problem is not with the position but with the occupant.
4. You’re part of this team and are under contract to accomplishing something important.

My research on this subject has found a lot of materials on leadership, but with the underlying assumption that the leader occupies the “in charge” position. The advice offered is to enable him to use this authority better. There is almost nothing available on leading when you have no authority to do so. So what to do?

First of all, let’s list the things we do know:

1. Experience tells us that if we are to question authority, we must do it respectfully. Why? Because they have the power and we do not. Besides, we may possibly be wrong.
2. If we are unsure of our ground, we are better off doing nothing.
3. Lack of effective leadership usually results in a dysfunctional team; hence any situation we go into will be unhealthy to begin with, requiring more caution.

4. Not only must you know your own position, but you must know its CONTEXT, i.e. everyone else’s position as well.
5. You must have in advance everyone’s trust, and you earn it the old fashioned way by investing time, energy, patience and explaining what you are doing and why.
6. You must have a nearly perfect sense of timing. No margin for error here.
7. You must be nearly perfect in everything, but don’t let this tempt you to overplay your hand.

Now for the hard part. You can do all the above perfectly and still get hurt. Why? Simple. They have the power and you do not. You could make the wrong move and get hurt but WAIT, it gets worse. You could make the right move and get hurt even worse.

So why lead under such miserable circumstances?

- a. Because it is the right thing to do and doing the right thing carries with it its own rewards.
- b. It’s creative.
- c. Sometimes it’s necessary to challenge the underlying assumption, i.e. major premise. In this case it’s “The person in charge has a right to lead his team into the ground if he wants to”.

Dorothy L. Sayers, an English writer of mystery novels, said it better: “The hand of the creative artist laid upon the major premise, rocks the foundations of the world, and he himself can indulge in this perilous occupation only because his mansion is not in the world but in the eternal heavens.”

It might be wise to check the location of our “mansion” before rushing into this particular leadership calling. Success is not guaranteed.