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# When a Leader Is Not a Boss

**T**he corporate entity has evolved from a hierarchical organisation of the past to a flat matrix structure today. The traditional organisation with a straight boss-subordinate relationship is less common now, as organisations expect their people to work in teams. Responsibilities today are defined, and yet not so well defined; everyone is expected to deliver more than what is stated in their job descriptions.

Corporates are realising that leadership is not always based on a position, or power. A true leader can be anyone who decides to lead, irrespective of his or her position. He, or she, is the leader who provides direction to others, and influences a group of people to move ahead. In the current corporate environment, the one who leads has to persuade others without having any direct authority over them. Often, the set of people whom one needs to influence may be their peers, juniors, or even seniors. We have to “Lead, without being the boss!”

This is easier said than done, and in a group of many bright professionals only a few exhibit this quality. For professionals who wish to zoom ahead in their careers, mastering this art has become crucial.

The following are 10 tips on how this simple art may be mastered, though not in any specific order:

**I**n a situation where there is no defined leadership hierarchy, the leader is deemed one and respected when seen taking decisions which others have hesitated to take before



an individualistic culture. A person who can promote this culture will be a well-accepted leader. To lead by not being a leader, one needs to foster a culture where everyone is heard, and every opinion is counted. This does not necessarily mean that all opinions are accepted. A mere culture of openness can transform ordinary teams to deliver, and a person who can facilitate this culture will be accepted as the natural leader.

**4. Gain commitment...** it is important for an informal leader to gain commitment from one and all, as it is only then that results will be achieved and the team will bring success. The leader will not be able to achieve this alone, he / she must know and be willing to accept that there is no leader without the team, and the task cannot be done alone, however qualified the leader may be. To gain commitment from all, the leader has to listen to others, and

**1. Take decisions...** a leader is not afraid to take decisions. In a situation where there is no defined leadership hierarchy, the leader is deemed one and respected when seen taking decisions which others have hesitated to take before.

**2. Establish clear goals, and accountability...** a team with a clear objective and goal will achieve better measurable results than the one with ambiguous targets. An informal leader will thus, need to set clear tasks and goals to achieve, in order to be automatically accepted as a leader. A team without a clear assigned leader, is directionless, and will look to a person who shows leadership by making everybody accountable to a common corporate goal. To achieve this, the leader will ensure that the tasks are well defined, distributed, and well accepted.

**3. Create an environment to participate...** a culture that facilitates collaboration and co-creation is always more effective than



also consult them when taking a decision. To win, it is important that a leader converts 'one person's idea' into everybody else's, and never rushes into a solution mode without getting a 'buy-in' from the team. A team which is not committed, will resist many initiatives taken by the leader, and thus, will not deliver great results.

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**5. Knowing people...** a person who wishes to lead should know all the people in the team and outside it in the wider organisation. The leader should be able to gain the confidence of the critical people within the organisation whose knowledge and opinion matter, and be able to tap them for their insights on important issues; and equally, identify the people in his team who will be critical in delivering the task at hand.

**6. Maintain relationships and create a network...** a natural leader is one who networks well both within and outside the company. In an environment where a formal leadership is missing, a good network can help to overcome certain bottlenecks in his / her function. Acquiring this trait can result in a more comfortable relationship with the team.

**7. Demonstrate thought leadership....** people welcome those who demonstrate thought leadership. This requires the leader to not just know his / her function very well, but also have knowledge and focus beyond the area of expertise. A thought leader provides energy to the team through innovative ideas and ways of accomplishing a task, and finding solutions in challenging times. Such leaders are well respected

by their teams and by the organisation.

**8. Establish a feedback mechanism...** a leader establishes a proper review mechanism, through which he / she gets connected with the team, earns respect, and gets known for execution skills. However, mere discussions without an end-objective and timelines for team members will disorient any team. It is therefore, necessary to have a pre-defined review



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the corporate entity. To facilitate this, the leader must keep proper communication channels open both with the team and outside in the larger organisation.

You never know when you will need to master the art of being the leader, without being the boss! ■

mechanism which will help the team to get connected on a periodic basis, with an end-goal in mind. The reviews have to be benchmarked against certain metrics that the leader needs to establish. A culture of productivity and an efficiency-led organisation will help leaders to establish themselves better.

**9. Resolve conflict...**any team with diverse interests is bound to generate conflict. A leader will be a person who can effectively convert the conflicts into positive energy.

This requires the leader to assume responsibility and be able to communicate effectively all the time. And, in a conflict situation, be able to identify the cause for it, and effectively guide the team towards a solution.

**10. Be humble...**in a group, when a person realises that he / she is being treated as a leader in the organisation although he / she does not occupy such a position, it is important to remain humble, and demonstrate humility all the time. There is a very thin line between arrogance and confidence, and a leader needs to understand this carefully.

### Conclusion

In a situation where hierarchy is not well defined, an effective leader learns from experience and guides the team forward. Demonstrating leadership by taking informed and calculated risks and help the team overcome challenges will establish his / her leadership in

*The views expressed herein are those of the author and have no bearing on AkzoNobel India*