Follow your Leader

1. Introduction:
One of my friends and associates (Mr Ray Smith, Leadership coach with London Business School and former trainer for BP Leadership Faculty) was visiting Hong Kong recently and we enjoyed Hong Kong great delicacy (Dim Sum over Yum Cha) in Tung Chung. Ray praised the facilities offered to those living in the outskirt and outer islands of Hong Kong that we took for granted in the inner city of Hong Kong. It was a golden opportunity for me to share my knowledge and experience with an expert (與高手過招). There were many ideas being exchanged that created new perspective in leadership development for young executives (business executives and business owners).

2. Misconception about Business Leadership:
What is Leadership? There are many interpretation of leadership; this is the one that I think best describe what Leadership is. Leadership is the ability to inspire or influence others towards the achievement of leader’s goal.

Although the concept of leadership has been around for ages, there are still some misconceptions about it.

Authority and leadership:
In Asia, it is widely believed that those high up in the traditional company’s hierarchy have leadership. In fact, the boss or senior executive are the leaders of the company but it is only through their authority or power that staffs have to follow their orders. It is leadership through obedience to power instead of through inspiration and influence of others. In westernise companies, leadership approach is different.
Leadership and management; they have to be entwined:

Every manager has to manage his subordinates. Managers have to meet objectives, plan, ensure its implementation, coordinate, measure and monitor, review and take actions to fulfill assignment. Generally, managers manage activities that are part of their responsibilities. Whereas the leader leads his/her team to fulfill assignment and achieve goals. It is important that the team and activities are properly managed.

Leaders are charismatic:

The image of leaders for being outspoken, taking charge and domineering are projected by Hollywood heroes. Gandhi is a powerful and influential leader. He was not outspoken (but peoples listen), he was small in stature (peoples look up to him) and he led by examples (he walk the talk and his actions speak lauder than words).

Learn from great leaders but hard to duplicate:

Each person is unique, what is successful to a great leader might not produce the same result for you because the great leader is unique and so are you (this applies to team members as well).

3. Leadership development and enhancement:

The first question is why should anyone follow you?

To answer this question, it is better to look at the answer from followers’ perspective. What aspect of a leader that they are looking for if they are going to follow a leader. Here are four important aspects:

Black and white cats’ theory: Deng Xiao Ping said that “it does not matter if it is a black cat or a white cat; it is a good cat that catches mice”. It is an important aspect that leader must achieve results. No one likes to follow a loser. Leader must be a winner (track records of achievement are important).

Can you be trusted? Honesty, integrity and values are most important attributes that followers assessed in their leader before they follow him or her. Trust and faith in a leader.
Follow you to where? If a leader said to you “follow me” and you are likely to ask or just think “follow you to where”? Leader must have a big dream (vision) that must be clearly explained to followers and ensure that they shared the same dream.

What do I get out of it? In reality, leader must ensure that followers are benefited (what motivates each follower) with achieving goals or implementing the whole process of the assignment.

Note: In the **GALLUP study of over 10,000 followers**. It seems that followers have a very clear picture of what they want and need from leaders; they are:

**TRUST**: Followers will not tolerate dishonesty in a Leader. (Respect, integrity and honesty are the outcomes of strong relationships built on trust).

**COMPASSION**: Caring about your employees/followers as you care about your family and friends.

**STABILITY**: Leader provides stability and confidence to followers. (Security, Strength, support and peace)

**HOPE**: Enable followers to feel enthusiastic about the future (prospect in the company or prospect with following the leader).

The **second question** is; **what kind of leaders are you?**

There are so many Institutions, Consultancy companies, books and other publications promoting various type of leadership such as;

Adaptive leadership, Authentic leadership, Autocratic leadership, Democratic leadership, Laissez-faire leadership, Servant leadership, Transactional leadership and Transformational leadership etc. Experts will come up with new theory for leadership in the future.

Note: Please learn about each type of leadership and understand the pros and cons as well as which one that you and your situation fit most.

The important issues here are you must understand yourself and the type of leadership that suit you the best, you need to understand current business
environment that you work in and the followers that you have or able to recruit. The world is evolving and you have to change and fit (adapt to) the environment. The business survival instinct is coming into play.

The **third question** is **what is the purpose of developing your leadership skills?**

When I asked Young Executives this question, the most common answer was to be a **better leader**. Great! I followed up with another question, what is the purpose of being a better leader? They indicated, Lead the team more effectively (this is what we expect leaders to do). It seems that they have not thought about the purpose of being a better leader for.

In the business world, we have to be realistic. Think about your purposes and what leadership skills need to be developed in order to lead the team to achieve these goals.

The **fourth question** is **how to improve your leadership skills?**

It is normal to conduct a strength and weakness analysis on yourself. The problem is that people tend to focus on their weaknesses and improving them instead of focusing their effort on what they do best (their strengths) and enhancing and honing their leadership skills from learning what great leaders do but not copying them. What works for them might not work for you. You are unique and you have to develop leadership skills that suit you.

**Leadership and start from yourself:** In business environment, you must understand your position and roles that you can excel and contribute in the development of an organisation. Satisfying the customers (gaining customers loyalty) and meeting their needs and expectation are one of the main goals of the organisation.

The business of the organisation must be healthy (profitable and have potential for growth and development).

It is important to understanding the cultural aspect of the organisation (corporate culture and the culture and mind set of the people). Knowledge and change are critical in the development of a healthy corporate culture.
Start from yourself: **Knowing yourself first**; you must understand and know your strengths in both management and leadership. Be honest with yourself and be authentic. I was discussing Leadership with **Mr Po Chung** (Founder of The Hong Kong Institute of Service Leadership & Management (HKI-SLAM)) at a symposium organised by Hong Kong Science Technology Park (HKSTP) and Mr Chung stressed that the **Character** of the leader is most important.

Note: if you look at the findings from GALLUP survey on followers, you can see that Honesty, Integrity and respect are what followers want from a leader.

As one of the leaders in your organisation, you have to lead followers and act as follower to your superior and even peers. This is where the development of your leadership skills is most vital.

Note: There will be future articles on type of leadership and improving leadership skills.

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