

You Are a Leader (Really!)

by Stew Friedman

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Too often I hear the word “leader” misused. It’s a sad fact that many business professionals don’t see themselves as leaders, mainly because “leader” is a term typically linked to people in positions of formal authority. This is a fallacy that undermines performance, in all aspects of life.

Someone said to me recently, “I don’t see myself as a leader. I do not feel comfortable embracing that label. I feel like it isn’t something I have earned.” This is a dangerous point of view - and it’s certainly inconsistent with what our new president called for in his inaugural address! All of us must lead if we are to create sustainable change and make our world better.

If, for whatever reason, you don’t think you’re a leader, then give me a minute or two to offer a couple of observations that might help you see things a bit differently. Do you know of anyone in a management role who doesn’t know how to mobilize people toward valued goals? Do you know people who have no hierarchical authority but are great at leading others? My guess is that the answer is yes to both these questions.

Leadership is not about position. Nor is it about career stage, gender, or culture, although the way leadership plays out is influenced by these and other factors.

“But I don’t have the talent,” some say. How do you become an effective leader, in a way that fits who you are and who you want to become? There is a clear answer to the irksome question, “You can’t teach leadership, can you?” It’s true, teaching leadership is pretty much impossible. But you can - indeed, I would say you must - learn how to lead. Even people who do think of themselves as leaders still need to practice in order to get better.

Leadership is a performing art, and you can never be too good at it. It's like sports or music. You cannot be too good at playing the saxophone, for example. Think of your favorite athlete or musician. Was he or she as good at 17 as at 32 years old? Probably not; great performers devote themselves to increasing their capacity to perform. It's the same with leaders. The best ones commit to learning continually, because they want to make a difference.

You have to choose to be a leader. Easier said than done, but it really is that simple. Becoming a better leader is as much a state of mind as anything else. You can develop your leadership capacity, if you want to, no matter how many people (even if none) are reporting to you as their boss. Is there anyone stopping you? The only person who can do so is the one in the mirror.

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