

What is Leadership?

Leadership is the process of motivating other people to act in a particular way in order to achieve specific goals. The emphasis is on action because although leaders may exert influence through inspirational speeches, they are judged on what they do.

As the Chinese proverb quoted by John Adair (1989) says,

“Not the cry but the flight of the wild duck leads the flock to fly and follow.”

The definition used in the Management and Leadership Development Strategy for Northern Ireland (MDSNI) is as follows:

“Leadership develops vision, sets future direction, motivates positive engagement in strategy/planning and generates a culture of constructively challenging convention.”

Perhaps a more practical, if somewhat mundane, definition of leadership is provided by Hannagan (2002):

“Leadership is the process of motivating other people to act in particular ways in order to achieve specific goals.”

As Bennis (1959, p259) observed, and this is still true today,

“Always it seems the concept of leadership eludes us or turns up in another form to taunt us again with its slipperiness and complexity. So we have invented an endless proliferation of terms to deal with it...and still the concept is not sufficiently defined.”

Gary Yukl (2006, p8) presents a definition that encompasses a more collective approach:

“Leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives.”

Leaders need to have followers and to share common goals with their followers. It involves other people, who by the degree of their willingness to accept direction help to define the leader’s status. It can be argued that people can exhibit ‘qualities of leadership’ in a variety of circumstances. The question is often asked, “Are there born leaders?” If leadership is seen as a process that can be analysed and a series of actions which can be identified then it can be learned, at least to some extent.

John Adair in Great Leaders (1989) suggests that,

“The common sense conclusion of this book is that leadership potential can be developed, but it does have to be there in the first place”

Leadership can be seen as the ability to:

- Create a vision
- Present that vision so that others are inspired to achieve it
- Drive the vision forward so that, no matter what happens, the vision becomes a reality.

Leadership requires many skills, including the ability to learn from the past and anticipate the future, communicate effectively, create good relations, organise resources, constantly hold the vision for success and act courageously and ethically at all times.