

You lead if someone follows you

It's a tricky thing with leadership functions. In most cases they come with a position equipped with formal power and authority: you can tell your employees what to do. You can resolve conflicts by the use of power. You can make decisions even against the will of your subordinates. And all this might now and then be necessary and ok. It, does not make you a leader, though.

The structural combination of leadership function and position of power can tempt you to equate leading with using power, and this concept reaches its limits quickly. Ambitious „high potentials“ sometimes think „when I reach a leadership position, I will at last be able to enforce the right things“. They make hard landings when they reach the ceiling of this logic. In times of indirect and distributed leadership tasks, these crashes come even earlier.

Leading is based on intertwining: somebody leads, somebody follows. This contains a fascinating paradox: you are leading well, when people follow you – but following is based on voluntariness. If you try to achieve that by using power: good luck.

As a leadership person you find yourself having formal power, and at the same time you are confronted with the fact that it is of surprisingly little use, because each time you make use of formal power you pay a considerable price: whoever gets hit by power experiences a moment of uncertainty, and, more or less consciously, questions pop up like: how safe am I here? Can I hope for support when things get tight? Is it worthwhile arguing? Should I expose myself in the future? Etc.

From that you can infer that leaders should make use of their formal power as seldom as possible. There are organisations experimenting by explicitly not equipping their leaders with formal authority. Consequently they don't call these functions leadership functions anymore, but for example support functions. One can argue about whether this is still a leader's position, and the answer is neither obvious nor trivial. Personally I find thinking about this question much more interesting than the answer.

Leading and following are like a dancing couple: they're closely interconnected, curving around one another and in space, and when they're in harmony, they radiate lightness and beauty that catch the eye and make you want to participate.

So this is the challenge to leaders: move in a way that invites your colleagues to follow and makes them decide to do so by their own free choice.

The most likely way to achieve this is to let yourself be seen in your humaneness and integrity, to display a high sense of responsibility for the potential of your formal power – that in most organisations you will most probably have – and to use that power cautiously when you feel that you have to use it, so that it remains emotionally legitimised and accepted by your employees.

To lead means to encourage the readiness to follow. The more you succeed in that, the less you will need mechanisms of control – and that will save you time and money and be much more fun. Leadership at the highest level has its own aesthetics. „Beautiful leadership“ at the level of mastery, even when it comes to making tough decisions? Yes, why not?