



Peer Leadership: Only Real Leaders Need Apply

When I was in the Army, I once suggested that if we really wanted to find out who the true, effective, leaders were amongst us we should all take off our rank insignia. I was sort of joking, sort of not joking, when I said it. Of course, in the military the culture of the organization mandates that symbols of power and authority be prominently displayed. Generals are sometimes called "flag" officers since their presence is made known by a flag displaying the number of stars they merit.

I'm not sure how I would have fared if the Army had taken me up on my suggestion to divest ourselves of any visible signs of power, rank, authority, though I think I would have been ok--meaning I believed I would have been effective--in most circumstances. The military, arguably more than any civilian organization, must rely on the legitimate authority of its leaders.

Nonetheless, I think my "rank-less" point was understood by those who heard it: When a leader cannot rely on the inherent authority associated with his title or position, what then, can he rely on to lead? In such an instance, everyone appears equal--we're all peers.

I've always maintained that peer leadership is the ultimate test for any leader since it requires astute use of influence skills. How do you convince someone who doesn't have to follow you to do so? How do you exercise influence over someone for whom you can offer no tangible reward? How do you lead someone who doesn't fear retribution for not obeying?

It's possible. It happens all the time. The answer is easy to describe and pinpoint, yet a lot more difficult to master. The researchers who study power tell us that people who effectively lead their peers, those who can get things done through other people, are those who are viewed by their peers as experts, masters of the technical skills required to perform a task or job. People, including peers, will follow an expert because they believe he knows how to perform a job better than they do--that he possesses and can demonstrate knowledge they don't have.

But, there's another aspect to leading peers that the researches point to: respect and admiration; put another way—style. Effective peer leaders are able to lead because of **how** they interact with their peers. They treat them with respect, not disdain or contempt. They trust them—nearly unconditionally—and they give that trust before they themselves are trusted. They **connect** with their peers and act as equals.

When peer leaders are experts **and they are respected and admired**, they are highly effective. Come to think of it, when **any** leader, in any situation, is viewed as an expert and enjoys the respect and admiration of his followers they are highly effective.

Put yourself to the test. Lead your followers like you were their peer. I promise, you'll learn quickly how good (or not) you really are.

Maybe my idea about a rank-less Army wasn't so absurd, after all.