

John F. Graham  
Contributing Editor

# Leadership at all levels



Most leadership occurs in the middle layers of the organization. When you mention the word leader, most people think of the person at the top of an organization. It is easy to think of a military four-star general as a leader, but what about a sergeant leading a group in combat? Though the position of sergeant is a long way from a general, the soldiers are very concerned with the sergeant's leadership ability when the bullets are flying.

The late Lee Marvin, an award-winning actor, was once asked in a television interview about his earning the Navy Cross in the Marine Corp battle at Iwo Jima. He played it down and bragged about his Sergeant Keeshan. He said that Sergeant Keeshan was one of the finest leaders he had ever know he led by example and would die for you if necessary. Lee also stated that Sergeant Keeshan received the Navy Cross for the same battle, but what the Sergeant did for his Cross made Lee's look cheap in comparison. Interestingly, Sergeant Bob Keeshan later went on to star in a 1960s children's program as Captain Kangaroo.

How do you lead if you are not in the official "power" position? It's easy to implement your ideas in the organization when you are in a key position with people reporting to you. If you delegate well and follow up, you should generally get good results. However, if leadership only comes from those individuals dominating the organization chart, many opportunities for excellence will be missed. The unofficial leader can also make a real difference.

The unofficial leader at any level feels a responsibility beyond his or her own job requirements. This is where situational leadership becomes important. Many times each of us finds ourselves faced with an opportunity to positively influence others and the outcome of events. We may not be in the official leadership position, but we can still lead. We must first earn the respect of those around us. Then we must subtly sell our ideas. We can:

- Share our own values
- Make suggestions
- Tell a success story
- Lead by example
- Ask critical questions.

Through the years I have been greatly influenced by other more experienced employees, even the "unofficial" leaders of the organization, buried in the organization

chart. They cared about the company, and they seemed to care about me. These individuals took the time to ask me the important questions and truly listen to my answers. They quickly earned my respect and greatly influenced my progress. They did not make me feel nervous or self-conscious when in their presence. I was completely open to listen and learn. A genuine leader lifts people up. Interestingly, I also noticed the official leaders higher up in the organization frequently consulted these "unofficial" leaders for their input.

As a young engineer, my supervisor once gave me a very tough assignment. I listened carefully and took notes as he gave me all the details. Once he finished, he asked me, "What do you think?" I told him, "This sure won't be easy." He then said, "If it were easy, I wouldn't need you." I will never ever forget those words. They lifted me up and gave me the confidence to do an excellent job in an area I had never worked before.

To be a leader means that in some way people follow. If you are effectively leading people, they will not only willingly follow you, they will also want to be like you. A true leader displays character and values that other wish to obtain. You don't have to be at the top of the organization chart to

---

**A true leader displays character  
and values that others wish to obtain. You  
don't have to be at the top of the organization  
chart to display desirable character and values.**

---

display desirable character and values.

Good leaders are also good followers. The top of the organization is responsible for the strategic vision and the direction of the organization. The remaining leaders within the organization are responsible for supporting the execution of this strategy. These internal leaders know they must follow the battle plan. Internal leaders must lead one minute and follow the next. This individual may walk out of her department meeting where she just led a one-hour meeting, and immediately walk into another executive meeting where she is receiving instructions from a superior.

The unofficial leaders of the organization are also excellent followers. They not only follow, but promote their department's game plan. This fact earns them a great deal of respect and is part of what makes them a leader. They understand that everyone wants to be part of a winning team. ❖

*John Graham is the C.O.O. of Pipeline Inspection Company, Houston, Texas.*