



## ACCOUNTABILITY, COLLABORATION, AND GOOD LEADERSHIP PRACTICES: REVIEW BY AN EXPERIENCED HR PROFESSIONAL

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### Abstract

Having been an HR practitioner for over 20 years, I took a leadership class at a small public university in Washington, DC. Through the prism of new ideas, I evaluated and conducted a small case study of my organization and rethought all my ideas on effective leadership in organizations. I hope that these new findings would be helpful to all leaders and managers in organizations who are striving to be humane and effective leaders.

Key Words: Leadership, Organizations, Collaboration, Effective Leadership

### Introduction

One of the authors is an experienced HR professional, with over 20 years of professional experience in the field. She has decided, over the course of her career, to take a course on leadership, from a small public university in Washington, DC, thinking and considering her extensive field experience,

that there isn't much to gain from a formal course on leadership.

She viewed leadership primarily as influence and ability to guide conversations, contribute ideas, and support others. However, through both the course material coupled with professional experience, her understanding of leadership has shifted significantly.

Leadership is not just about participation or having a strong presence; it is about holding responsibility for outcomes and being accountable for decisions.

Leadership is one of the most common and least understood concepts in business today, in spite of it being taught and discussed for almost a century. Some people are perceived as leaders in their work environment due to their personality, time in the organization or their power, yet none of these make somebody a leader. As organizations become increasingly complex, particularly in the context of her current organization, the clear lines of leadership responsibilities, authority, and accountability are key to keeping the operations efficient.

As a Senior Human Resources Business Partner, she has witnessed how confusing leadership structures, unbalanced authority and poor communication may be factors in slow decision making and unhappiness in teams. One of the authors then conducted an interview with the Director of Human Resources to gain a better grasp of leadership, gaps and how decisions are made inside the organization.

The interview validated many of the ideas studied in this course, especially the necessity of cooperation, responsibility and leadership conduct.

#### Leadership Roles, Authority and Responsibility

One of the concerns in many organizations is that it is not clear what constitutes a leadership role (Jaques 2002), (Clement, 2013, 2015), (Ivanov 2011, 2022, 2023, 2026). Leadership should be about the official responsibility for making decisions and being accountable for the results, not just influence or involvement.

In my organizational work as an HR professional, I often take the lead on projects without having direct authority over all decisions. For example, I provide leadership on ADA accommodations, employee relations and compliance. I provide recommendations that directly impact employees and the organization.

However, analyzing the role, I do not always have the final decision-making authority. This creates a situation where I contribute to outcomes, but I am not always the one accountable for them.

The Director recognized and confirmed that there are gaps when senior leaders are expected to lead initiatives, but might not properly connect authority and accountability, especially when leadership is mistaken for influence instead of responsibility.

When authority and accountability are out of sync:

- Organizational decision-making is slow
- Accountability is not clear
- Employee performance suffers

This is why it is important to clarify leadership roles so that people know what they are responsible for and may act accordingly.

### Competition Versus Collaboration

A core issue for organizational performance is competition vs collaboration. Many scholars, over centuries, have studied this phenomenon, most notably Darwin (1859), Kropotkin (1902), Deming (2018), Harvey (1984, 1988), Jaques (2002), Ivanov (2011), and many others. From the principles learned in class, the organization embodies a collaborative environment across all departments. The company is defined as “very collaborative and mission-driven” organization, and that’s been the author’s professional experience as well.

When we decided to upgrade how we conducted performance management, the deployment was successful because of its collaboration between HR, leadership, IT, and a team member from each department. The HR team saw an increase in performance review completion rates, and better engagement, because everyone had “buy-in” into the new system.

Our interview also uncovered subtle barriers to collaboration when it was stated that there can be tension between the compliance team and program team notably regarding processing grants and expectations of workload. This is a typical organizational problem where clashing priorities can inadvertently cause friction.

We also discussed the role of HR in improving collaboration through:

- Leading by example
- Promoting an inclusive environment
- Keeping lines of communication open

Collaboration must be purposefully developed and designed organization-wide to encourage connection, involvement, and innovation.

Competition can promote short term increase in performance, but in my HR work, I’ve also seen that too much internal competition can create silos and decrease trust among teams. I learned the term *anaclitic depression* (Harvey, 1988), which helped to explain why teamwork and collaboration are important. If employees feel unsupported or detached, they become less engaged, less likely to contribute, and are generally unhappy.

For instance, in the upgrade of the new performance management system, success was significantly reliant on collaboration across departments. This was not something HR could lead alone. We had to get the supervisors on board, communicate clearly to the staff and coordinate with IT. Had the departments competed for this process, with solely their own priorities in mind, the implementation would have failed. Instead, teamwork enabled us to boost employee engagement in performance reviews from about 50% to over 85%.

Another example is how I handle ADA accommodations. I have to manage information between HR, employees, supervisors and sometimes other providers. A competitive or combative strategy would lead to stress and delay solutions, while a collaborative approach assures compliance and supports employee requirements.

Organizations should be collaborating internally. This lets companies stay in the running and maintain cohesion which is critical for innovation and long-term organizational success.

#### Good vs Bad Leadership in Practice

The most useful things I learned from the interview with the Director were on how effective leadership is.

#### *Good Leadership*

Strong leaders:

- Lead by example
- Communicate clearly and consistently
- Create opportunities for others to succeed
- Stand aside and empower others when needed

I've seen the Director follow these leadership traits on many of our significant HR projects. For example, during a major project to which I was assigned to as a project lead, the Director, allowed me to manage the project from start to finish. We had weekly check-in meetings regarding the project, but I was in a leadership role, and it was

completed in a timely manner and to the customer's satisfaction.

#### *Poor Leadership*

Inadequate leadership is typically defined by:

- Not taking accountability
- Problems with communication
- Inability to delegate effectively
- Lack of empathy

For example, a senior leader missed the mark on a very important database migration project because of delegation and unclear ownership that led to the migration taking double the time and having many glitches and issues. I've seen these issues before, where supervisors don't handle performance issues or the supervisor is the one with the performance issue, and HR must interfere regularly.

#### *Key Insight*

The most crucial point to remember is that leadership performance is behavioral, not positional. Leaders need to:

- Take Responsibility
- Communicate clearly
- Give others power
- Remain engaged

Without these characteristics, even people in high-level positions can be unsuccessful.

#### Personal Reflection on Leadership

One of the most important insights I gained in the course is understanding of my own position in leadership. In this class, I do not consider myself a leader because I do not hold formal responsibility or accountability for directing the class or ensuring outcomes.

While I actively participate and contribute, I am not responsible for the performance of others. This distinction challenged my previous thinking. I used to associate leadership with engagement and contribution. Now, I understand that leadership requires ownership of outcomes.

However, outside of the classroom, I do serve as a leader. In my HR role and as Chapter President of Beta Chapter of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. and Chapter President of Tau Sigma National Honor Society, I am responsible for decision-making, guiding others, and ensuring results. These roles require me to take accountability, even when outcomes are difficult or uncertain. This has also influenced how I think about my future. As I prepare to move into more senior leadership roles, I recognize that leadership will require not just knowledge or experience, but the willingness to take full responsibility for decisions and their impact.

#### Conclusions and Recommendations

The following are important recommendations drawn from both course concepts and real-world case study and insights. In practice, to attain good and effective organizational leadership:

1. Establish clear leadership roles and responsibilities
2. Align authority with accountability
3. Create a collaborative and supportive culture
4. Promote leaders based on competence
5. Improve communication at all levels

In conclusion, this small course on leadership has changed how I view leadership. Leadership is not about influence, participation, or title, but about responsibility, accountability, and behavior. My professional experiences in HR, combined with insights from the Director, have shown that leadership effectiveness is not accidental, that it is an intentional task. Moving forward, I will approach leadership with a clearer understanding of what it requires and a stronger commitment to accountability and collaboration.

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