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Meet the MasterMinds: Aubrey Daniels on What Followers Reveal about Leaders

Aubrey C. Daniels helps the world's leading organizations apply the principles of behavioral science to the workplace. His consulting firm, Aubrey Daniels International, works with business leaders to develop management strategies that reinforce behaviors for long-term success.

Daniels is the author of [Bringing out the Best in People](#), [Performance Management](#), and [Other People's Habits](#). His latest book, [Measure of a Leader](#), lays out a new way to define great leadership by examining the behavior of followers.

MCNews: Given how much has already been written on leadership, why another book on the subject?

Daniels: Opinions on leadership are certainly abundant. I once got more than 16,000 search engine results on the subject. Although leadership has been dissected and written about for hundreds of years, the failure rate for American business leaders is 50 to 60 percent. Clearly, we still have a problem.

MCNews: What explains this ongoing problem?

Daniels: Partly it's because, in spite of all the work that's been done, there's no real agreement on the definition of leadership. Usually it's defined so broadly that it's up to the individual to decide what constitutes good leadership.

And many people approach the subject by drawing simple, universal leadership "truths" from stories and personal histories of individuals. More often than not, the leaders who are held up as role models are charismatic people. Leadership is not a personality trait. But charismatic profiles tend to make people believe that's all there is to it.

Unfortunately, many organizations also adopt this simplistic view of leadership, which often leads to the disastrous results we've seen in the past.

MCNews: So let's start with what you think should be the common definition of leadership.

Daniels: Simply stated, the role of the leader is to establish the conditions under which all performers will choose to execute the mission, vision, and values of the organization. I'd add that leadership is about affecting behavior, so when we talk about leading people, we should really talk about leading people's behavior.

“Although leadership has been dissected and written about for hundreds of years, the failure rate for American business leaders is 50 to 60 percent. Clearly, we still have a problem.”

MCNews: You say that a different model is necessary for identifying effective leaders. How would you describe that model?

Daniels: What we're writing about is measuring the effectiveness of leaders by examining the behavior of their followers. We define leadership, not only by a leader's behavior, but also by the behavior of a leader's followers.

In many organizations, leaders are evaluated solely on results. To use one of the best-known examples, Enron was once considered to be a model organization. Enron's leaders were hailed in the press and by financial analysts as role models. The company's stellar results were held up as proof of the Enron success story and the prowess of the company's leadership team.

It wasn't too much later that the company was shown to be rotten to the core.

So relying on results alone is a flawed way to decide which behaviors to reward and which ones to punish.

Instead, leadership performance should be measured by looking for results produced through correct behavior. When you examine results in the context of how people behaved to achieve those results, you get a far clearer picture of a leader's effectiveness.

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MCNews: What typical behaviors do you think are the result of an effective leader?

Daniels: We've developed four criteria of followers' behavior that we believe point to a good leader. To begin with, the best leaders inspire their followers to go beyond whatever is minimally required to get a job done. That inspiration isn't based on coercion, but a dedication to the leader's goals and vision.

We also test to see if the leader's followers are willing to make sacrifices for the leader's objectives. We look for followers who are willing to give up something for the leader to demonstrate a commitment to the leader—and the cause.

Successful leaders have followers who believe the leader's goals are important enough that they support those goals by encouraging—and correcting—others so the entire group's behavior supports the leader's priorities.

Finally a leader must create an environment of trust and mutual respect for what each person contributes to the organization.

MCNews: How should organizations expand the evaluation of leaders to get a better view of leadership effectiveness?

Daniels: In evaluating leaders, we should rely on a set of numbers, instead of solely on judgment. And the numbers we use should pertain to measuring follower behavior. For example, you might ask, “how do I get more people in the organization to complete a certain task?”

The predictors of leadership success fall into four categories, which answer the questions: How do followers respond to the direction set by the leader? How focused are followers on the goals of the leader? How do followers relate to each other? How do followers react to the leader?

MCNews: In what ways do these measures predict a successful leader?

Daniels: The first question assesses how a leader introduces and leads change in an organization. It's instructive to know how quickly a leader's ideas gather momentum. The second question addresses the issue of whether or not and how well the followers actually perform the tasks necessary to achieve the goals set by the leader.

The third and fourth categories measure the leader's cultural impact on the organization by focusing on how well followers relate to the leader, the leader's goals, and to each other.

Taken together, these measures provide an accurate forecast of how the leader will manage and grow the business.

MCNews: How do you know if a leader has had a positive cultural impact?

Daniels: A successful leader creates a workplace in which followers are willing to make short-term sacrifices to help colleagues, or another work unit, achieve their objectives. The best leaders work hard to encourage productive relationships between followers.

Another sign is how well followers relate to the leader. Successful leaders have trusting relationships with their followers that allow for behaviors like admitting a mistake or discussing personal concerns without fear of retribution.

The culture of an organization is reflected in countless behaviors, some of which are readily apparent and some not. You have to pay attention and periodically measure those behaviors to learn what impact a leader is having.

MCNews: If you could offer a consultant one piece of advice on becoming a better leader, what would it be?

Daniels: It's tough to give just one piece of advice, but it would be this: Great leaders manage people so they respond to the cause, not the leader's personality.

It's common to see some political leaders, for example, asking for loyalty on an individual level. In a business, when you hear someone say, "I'll do this, but only because you asked," that demonstrates loyalty to an individual leader.

The most successful leaders transcend personality to develop a follower's loyalty to the organization's goals. A leader must continually challenge followers to reach for attainable goals so they will stretch and grow.

MCNews: What's on your reading list these days?

Daniels: I've just finished reading CK Prahalad's book, [*The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid*](#). Next on my list is [*The World is Flat*](#), by Thomas Friedman.

MCNews: Thanks for your time today.

To learn more about Aubrey Daniels, his books, and services, visit www.aubreydaniels.com.