

A 3D rendering of a balance scale. The scale is a long, thin, dark grey beam resting on a central triangular fulcrum. Two identical, glowing, translucent spheres are placed on the ends of the beam. The spheres have a bright white light source inside, creating a lens flare effect. The background is a light grey gradient. A red rectangular box is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing white text.

Lead(or) Manage?:
thoughts on distinction

It started with Bennis.

Bennis wrote that “Managers do things right, leaders do the right thing.” Many other leadership and management gurus followed suit. Soon the holy grail of leadership writing seemed to be a pithy, one-sentence distinction between leadership and management.

But it's a lot more complex than that. Leadership is a complicated subject that is difficult to summarize in a sentence, much less to distinguish it from management.

So we gave up.

Rather than attempt to settle on one, pithy distinction, we decided to band together and compile all of our distinctions. The challenge we gave ourselves was to use less than 200 words to answer the question:

What is the difference between leadership and management?

Shared Vision

Leadership includes developing a shared vision – then inspiring, developing and empowering the people who will achieve this vision. Management includes ensuring that the processes necessary for effective execution are carried out in an efficient way.

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View

The fundamental difference between those that act like managers and those that act like leaders is in how they view their followers.

Managers tend to view employees as resources who also happen to be human. These human resources are needed to get the work done, but everyone is replaceable with another that is similarly qualified, just like interchangeable parts of a machine. Consequently, managers tend to view followers as not wanting to do a good job and need to be coerced through reward or punishment into performing.

Instead of treating followers as interchangeable parts of a machine, leaders leverage the unique skills and attitudes that individuals bring to the job and try to grow the organization based on those individual skills. Leaders also understand that employees are individuals who each have unique motivations and want to do a good job. Leaders find ways to support each individual's growth and development, benefiting both the individual and the organization.

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Not All Managers

All leaders are managers but not all managers are leaders.

The very nature of business today requires everyone holding a job from supervisor through CEO to handle the “what's” of business – planning, organizing, directing and controlling. A business person must be able to manage – meaning to plan, organize, direct and control things – things like finances, inventory, work schedules, logistics, sales, record-keeping and reporting, compliance. The list goes on and on and represents the nitty-gritty requirements of running a business.

Yet it is the rare individual – either inside business or outside, with or without a job title – who transcends managing to become a leader. Someone whose personal qualities, the “how's” of their existence, allow them to guide, motivate and inspire. A leader touches people emotionally, even spiritually, bringing trust, respect, compassion, two-way communications and a feeling of collaboration and partnership to the organization. If that person holds a management job, an effective leader touches hearts and balances that with head practices (management) to get the work accomplished.

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Creators

Leaders are creators. Managers are care-takers.

Leaders create value. They visualize and articulate opportunities. They energize and enable others to turn opportunities into real services and products.

Managers are care-takers. They operate and optimize existing organizations.

Leaders are managers too. Managers are not necessarily leaders.

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Actions

The distinctions between leadership and management can be made complex, but don't need to be. They do, however, need to be understood.

Management and leadership are made up of different skills and both are cornerstones of success. Knowing the difference between the two can support your ongoing development in both areas and inspire others to do their best work.

Let's start with a high-level distinction and then we'll look at some tangible examples.

Management is made up of activities needed to run a business, unit, or organization to help achieve its goals. Leadership is what it takes to inspire and engage employees to contribute their best to achieve the goals, support the vision, carry out the mission, and embody the company's values.

What does that look like on a daily basis?

Management Actions	Leadership Actions
Review market reports and identify opportunities	Share a vision of the new opportunity and share it in ways employees understand and believe
Analyze bank/financial statements	Help employees see how their work contributes to success
Assess risks	Be willing to stand up for something, even if it means standing alone

Effective leadership can't happen without effective management. The two applied in concert create a mighty force.

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Get Rid of Management

I get quite a reaction when I say: "Let's get rid of management!" People just don't want to be managed. They want to be led. Leadership involves connecting with people in a meaningful way, while management focuses on the systems, processes and activities required to run the business day to day.

Things need to be managed. People want to be led. While managers are appointed, leaders appoint themselves and go about achieving objectives differently than managers. Effective leaders create positive emotions that inspire people to achieve more than what's expected. While managers are effective at getting things done in a precise way, they can't motivate people to go beyond - to invest their "discretionary" energy. Only leaders can bring out this discretionary energy in people because of the way they connect with and engage them. At best, managers can get people to do what they're required to do: comply. And they often rely on short-lived extrinsic motivators like incentives or threats.

Executives must maintain that balance between the necessary leadership that will inspire innovative thinking and commitment, and the appropriate management, that will maintain the consistency necessary to meet the marketplace expectations - without creating bureaucracy.

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Leadership & Management or Leaders & Managers?

Abraham Zaleznic believed managers are rational, impersonal and focused on getting the job done, whatever that job may be. By contrast, leaders are intuitive, empathetic and people-focused, primarily concerned with deciding what job should be done in the first place and getting people excited about doing it. Leaders steer their organization to new and exciting destinations, while managers make sure that everyone is fed along the way. It is important to note that Zaleznic distinguished leaders from managers, not leadership from management. In Zaleznic's view, managers and leaders were very different types of people, each with their own distinctive values and personalities.

John Kotter offers a new view leadership versus management. Kotter's work builds on Zaleznic's view of warm, inspiring leaders and well-organized, task-focused managers and adds another dimension – change. Managers are concerned with stability, efficiency and order, while leaders are concerned with innovation, adaptability and change. Leadership and management are different roles – not different people. As a result, you need to attend to both the task at hand and the people completing it while focused on productivity in the present and positioning the organization for the future

Leadership and management are complementary parts of your job.

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External versus Internal Control

The issue comes down to the characteristics of top-down, control, process-focused supervision (management) and bottom-up, goal-oriented, inspired vision (leadership). Consider the difference between control and vision, or better yet, the difference between internal control (leadership that inspires me to volunteer) and external control (top-down direction that forces me to comply).

This discussion is difficult and complex because there is no closed system where only one type of control exists. Order presupposes some control and in the absence of internal control, external prevails. External control is therefore necessary. Like darkness exists where light does not; external control exists in the absence of internal control. External control (management) is the default state in the absence of internal control (leadership or inspiration). Leadership arises out of a vision, and management exists in its absence. Chaos exists in the absence of either.

It is easier to fall back to the default of direction and control, enforcing rules and conformity. Internal control that springs from volunteer contributors creates greater energy and possibility than external control could ever hope to achieve. Instead, work to build consensus on a compelling, shared vision that inspires us to volunteer our lives in pursuit of noble achievements.

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The Semantic Expanse

Leadership and management are often seen as diametrically opposed forces. Management resides at one end of the spectrum, scorned as the controlling, authoritative, process-oriented, ruler of the reactive, who assumes all responsibility for outcomes. Across the semantic expanse, Leadership lives on exalted shores. Respected for an inclusive, supportive, influence-driven, people-oriented, proactive style, Leadership is known for delegating responsibility and ensuring outcomes through trust and accountability. This fulcrum model oversimplifies what it takes to get results in organizations.

Though on paper the modus operandi, orientation, and sources of power for management and leadership seem to be counterweights, realistically they are applied in varying degrees according to the needs of the situation and the people involved. For example, in dangerous jobs, a directive approach is of the utmost necessity as there is typically only one way to accomplish tasks safely. In less physically harrowing circumstances, such as the implementation of a new brand strategy, those in charge will find the most expeditious route to reaching goals is by inspiring cooperation and motivating cross-functional collaboration. The brass ring is the perfect blending of the two. Manage with the character of a leader and lead with the efficiency and focus of a manager.

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The Axiology of Leadership

Axiology is the study of value structures—how people make value judgments. There are three basic dimensions of value. They are (in descending order of importance): intrinsic (people), extrinsic (resources/productivity), and systemic (policies and procedures). Regardless of title, in any given moment a person is being either a leader, a manager, or a worker. In axiological terms, workers focus on *compliance* with established systemic work rules for *applying extrinsic* resources. Management is about the *allocation of extrinsic* resources and the *development and enforcement of systemic* work rules.

Leadership is all about *creation and development* in the intrinsic dimension—the unique, and infinite value of people and their potential. *Value-Centered* Leaders operate from an intrinsic perspective above all else: considering the intrinsic value, impact, motivation, and de-motivation factors of all actions, choices and changes. Mediocre leaders try to get people to create reasonable value for the stockholders. Great value-centered leaders are focused on *creating extraordinary value in and for* all stakeholders (especially employees), which naturally inspires and unleashes vast reserves of discretionary effort in support of a common purpose, mission, and vision. In value-centered organizations people move up the corporate hierarchy as their focus and skill moves up the value hierarchy.

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It's NOT Paradoxical – It's Definitional

The difference between leadership and management is actually quite simple. You manage things. You lead people. It's amazing there is so much confusion and writing on this point.

Management is task-focused. It's short term. It's a series of checklists and "to do's" that ensure the work gets done. It's how we execute tasks to achieve a specific desired outcome. It's taking actions to hit a budget number or deliver a project on time. Said most simply, it's the movement of personnel, materiel, and tasks with an exact set of results in mind.

Leadership is people-focused. It's the words said and actions performed to inspire something deep within another. It is the demonstration of a belief that others come before you and your only interest is their best interest. Leadership entails articulating a vision of something larger than all who are involved and helping those involved understand their role in achieving it. It's providing the spark that fires someone's drive to go take on seemingly insurmountable challenges because they believe in the desired outcome to the core of their being.

Leadership and management work hand in hand but truly are entirely different concepts.

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Interdependent

Leadership and management are interdependent functions required in the healthy maintenance of organizational systems. Leadership is the enabling expression, which supports the healthy evolutionary response to the environment. Management is the constraining expression, which supports the healthy homeostatic dynamics that maintain the essential identity of the system as it lives within the environment. Together, these functions ensure the integrity of the system.

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Leadagers

Management is universally viewed as a type of work. You can get a job as a manager. Rarely, if ever, is one hired as an assistant leader. Whether you view the job of manager as being indispensable or reprehensible, you would likely agree that most people working under the job title of "manager" don't alter the arc of history during the course of their career. To my knowledge, there is no Manager Hall of Fame. However, based on the sheer number of individuals working in the job of manager, it is obvious that collectively they most assuredly move the dial of progress.

Leadership is a role. Leadership is be top-down, bottom-up, even sideways. No matter the scope or style, great leadership exists on small, medium, and large scales. If you are hired as a manager or cast as a leader, soon you will find that great leadership always gets the sugar (money, power, respect, better jobs). Great leadership can quicken the transformation from losers to winners, no matter how you keep score. Great leadership shines a light that can invigorate or rejuvenate. Great leadership can wipe away today's pain or panic by focusing efforts toward a better tomorrow. Great leaders get more sugar because they bring forth the best chance to achieve success from plans, hopes, and dreams.

Management is usually a job, leadership is a role, and you can be accomplished at both. If they are done well simultaneously, that is a "leadagers" legacy.

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Situational Versus Operational

The Leader is a person who has been given the authority to lead a group of people. This group of people could have come together because of work, leisure or any other event. A leader is a very situational role, which can be short, medium or longer term. The leader obtains the authority from the group to lead through their behavior, influence and negotiation approach.

The Manager is a person who has been appointed to manage a task or activity. This could involve a group of people, but does not have to. Managing is an operational role driving to a specific goal or objective. The Manager is appointed based primarily on their technical skills.

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Focus

The difference between leadership and management can be summarized with the issue of focus – on “context” and “content.” Both are important. Both contribute to reaching peak performance. One without the other is destined to failure. These are two sides to the same coin. We manage *content* (e.g. time, space, tactics, logistics, projects, details, equipment, material, roles, resources, responsibilities, information, technology). We lead with *context* (e.g. priority, purpose, strategy, reasoning, relationships, meaning, value, connections). To truly inspire people and achieve results efficiently and effectively, we are wise to do both – in harmony. It is the balance of the two that gives us competitive advantage, innovation that matters, a system that fills a need and tactics that relate well to a strategy. One without the other is time consuming, frustrating and wasteful. When we divide the two, or see one as better than the other, we cause misunderstanding, confusion, disharmony and misalignment – surely a recipe for failure and something we often see when people manage without meaning.

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It's All About Value Creation

As a person who makes their living in the field of leadership, I can tell you without any doubt that the main difference between "Leaders" and "Managers" is found in their ability to create value. While both are unique in their value and contribution, this author simply believes that the law of scarcity applies to the topic at hand. There is an infinitely greater supply of managers, causing a much greater demand for leaders. Put simply, because leaders are much more difficult to come by, they are therefore more valuable to the enterprise.

We have all witnessed companies that have been over managed in the absence of leadership. When leadership has been abdicated to management in a corporate setting you will always find that growth slows, morale declines, creativity wanes, and the competitive edge is weakened.

If you still question who creates greater value and makes a larger contribution to a corporation, just examine the difference in the pay stubs of leaders versus managers. You'll quickly see who the enterprise deems to be of higher value: leaders.

I prefer to lead rather than manage and to be led rather than to be managed.

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20-40%

In the normal routine of life, jobs are created and people are hired with the expectation that the duties of the job will require about 60-80% of who that person is. This 60-80% can be defined as standard work. The process of making this more efficient, error-proof, consistent, belongs to the Manager. Management is focused on making processes better.

The 20-40% that is not commonly accessed can be defined as discretionary effort. This effort can only be summoned by the worker. This effort embodies creativity, passion, and innovation. Enabling workers to exert this effort is the role of the leader. Leadership involves working with any team to accomplish a task that is for the common good. A leader does not squeeze efficiency out of their employees; rather they light their passions on fire and get out of the way. Leadership is not directive; it is emboldening. It makes one's followers feel free. A leader is not a leader because they lead, but because they are followed. The power in the relationship does not reside with the leaders. Rather it resides with the followers, because they hold the keys to their passion, creativity and spark.

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Manage is Not a Four-Letter Word

The past few years I have been drawn to the gumption down-to-earth meat and potatoes of management while I have tired of attending yet another grandiose visioning session full of the future but lacking the substance of day-to-day operational work. Results occur through the art and science of managerial strategic improvisation responsive to change and also creating change.

A good leader manages and a good manager leads. I believe it is time to jump into the engine of the leadership and ensure there is enough fuel, crew, and resources to get us to our next port.

We need to manage all the demands and tasks coming at us and manage to ensure that leadership ideas and perspectives are brought to life and sustained in the organization. Management no longer gets work done through people it get work done with people.

Henry Mintzberg in *Managing*, said it well, “we are now overled and undermanaged.” Being managed by someone who doesn’t lead is dispiriting but being led by some who doesn’t manage is disengaging.

We need engaged managers who fully engage themselves and others in achieving results while strengthening relationships and building authentic community through conversation, collaboration and co-creation.

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Pithy

There are a plethora of short descriptions of leadership. Perhaps the most famous assertion about the difference between leadership and management is that managers do things right, while leaders do the right things. Most of these statements have the goal of being short and catchy, so they circulate around and increase the notability of the author. These descriptions are short and pithy, but not all that descriptive. In the spirit of these pithy phrases, I offer a new one that I hope will actually be found descriptive (and increase the notability of the author).

Management is concerned with coordinating individual strengths to achieve a determined outcome. Leadership, in contrast, is concerned with influencing individuals and teams to pursue a futuristic vision. Good managers become great by turning individual talents into performance. Good leaders become great by rallying individuals to pursue a better future.

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From executives to professors, from consultants to coaches, the contributors to Lead(or) Manage represent an array of perspectives on leadership.

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LeaderLab is a community of resources dedicated to the advancement of leadership theory. We believe there is a great need for real-life leaders to embrace the research and promote the practice of leadership theory. However, leadership theory is often condemned to strictly academic circles because practitioners haven't been given simple explanations on how to apply the best of leadership theory.