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## What is Leadership?

“IF LEADERSHIP IS DEFINED AS...” began an opinion piece in the *Wall Street Journal*. Most leadership definitions have an agenda. This is not to say they are bad, but that they reflect the bias of the writer. Narrow and sometimes cumbersome definitions may help to make a point or clarify what the writer considers *good* leadership *should* be, but they shortchange our understanding of leadership overall.

The fact that there are so many and assorted definitions of leadership speaks to the very human aspect of leadership. It is as varied as there are leaders and leadership needs. A good definition needs to allow many perspectives. It should create awareness. It should include leaders at all levels. It should raise more questions than it answers. It should lead to who, why, where, and how. Who is a leader? Why do they lead? In what context? When are they leading? How do we know? How do we evaluate it?

Our definition of leadership is important because it mirrors our perspective of leadership. Do we believe leaders are born or are they made. Is it for a select few, or can anyone make a difference?

A definition of *good* leadership is different from a definition of *what* leadership is. Defining good leadership is a separate issue. Leadership, like power is value neutral. It isn't inherently good or bad. It becomes good or bad depending on what we do with it. And humankind has done all kinds of things with it. Consequently we have good leaders and bad leaders.

Some definitions try to define away bad leaders as if to say, “Bad leaders can not really be considered leaders at all.” It is an attempt to define away our humanity. The problem is bad leaders are very real. They exist and they cause harm. With their leadership skills they play upon the worst in people and lead them into destructive thinking and behavior. This cavalier approach to leadership is a disservice to the study of leadership and undermines a serious understanding of the potential of leadership for good or bad.

Good leaders and bad leaders have a lot more in common when it comes to leadership than we might like to think. Being human, we have the potential to corrupt anything we touch and an awareness of this is important. Archbishop Desmond Tutu said that his experience has taught him two things: “we have this extraordinary capacity for good” and we “have a remarkable capacity for evil.” Armed with this understanding and the examples of those who have sadly corrupted those they led, we can better appreciate what we can do to maximize good leadership and minimize bad leadership. Defining bad leadership away undermines the importance of the values we associate with good leadership such as good character, humility, integrity and selflessness. A definition that allows that some leadership is bad can help to save us from our own hubris.

Most definitions create an impoverished view of leadership. Narrow business-centric definitions are not inclusive of all leaders at all levels and in all contexts. They are misleading. Leadership is far more complex and varied than most definitions would lead us to believe. Most definitions still reinforce the idea that leadership is positional. Acts of leadership by leaders with no title are dismissed. No definition for the study of leadership should be considered if it does not reflect the rich variety of leadership and is not inclusive of all potential leaders.

A working definition for the study of leadership needs to include leaders of all kinds, not just the leaders we find easy to identify. Certainly, leadership is about shared values, vision and results. It is exemplified through the work people do, the attitudes they adopt and the potential they realize. But it all begins with an intention to influence others. Most definitions tackle the *how* of leadership not the *what*. It is the *how* where we spend a lifetime working to improve our effectiveness at influencing. The *what* of leadership is simpler.

Leadership is intentional influence.

