



## Leading from Behind

By: Linda A. Hill

For now and into coming decade or so, the most effective leaders will lead from behind, not from the front — a phrase I've borrowed from none other than Nelson Mandela. In his autobiography, Mandela equated a great leader with a shepherd: "He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind."

It's a concept whose time has come, given several realities:

### **The psychological contract between companies and employees is changing.**

Among other things, people are looking for more meaning and purpose in their work lives. They want and increasingly expect to be valued for who they are and to be able to contribute to something larger than themselves. People expect to have the opportunity to co-author their organization's purpose. They want to be associated with organizations that serve as positive forces in the world.

**Innovation — not simply incremental but continual breakthrough innovation — will be a key driver of competitiveness.** Society's notion of the brilliant innovator, the solitary genius with a sudden flash of creative insights is hard to shake. But, after all, an iPod or a Pixar movie is not the product of a single person's vision or labors. Most innovation is the result of collaborative work involving a diverse group and a collective process of iteration and discovery. Those in positions of authority have been taught to think that it's their job to come up with the big idea — but sustained innovation comes when everyone has an opportunity to demonstrate a "slice of genius" (an idea that has evolved from my research with Greg Brandeau, the CTO of the Walt Disney Studios, and my research associate Emily Stecker). Breakthroughs come when seemingly ordinary people make extraordinary contributions.

**Leaders can encourage breakthrough ideas not by cultivating followers who can execute but building communities that can innovate.** Of course, leaders do need to act as direction-setters and vision-makers, and we need to prepare them for those roles. But we often emphasize these skills at the expense of others that are growing in importance. If you're looking for innovation, it doesn't make much sense to say that the leader's job is to set the

course and mobilize people to follow them there. If you want your team to produce something truly original, you don't know where you're going, almost by definition. The traditional leadership model just doesn't work.

Leading from behind doesn't mean abrogating your leadership responsibilities. After all, the shepherd makes sure that the flock stays together. He uses his staff to nudge and prod if the flock strays too far off course or into danger. For leaders, it's a matter of harnessing people's collective genius. Doing so entails two primary responsibilities — and they are not easy to get right.

First, leaders must ensure their organizations are willing to innovate. This is fundamentally about building community. Some leaders refer to this function as “creating a world to which people want to belong.” In these communities, people are valued for who they are and have the opportunity to contribute to something larger than themselves. These communities have a common purpose, values and rules of engagement about how people should interact and problem-solve together. A shared purpose brings the people together and makes them willing to do the hard work of innovation.

Second, leaders must build the organizational capabilities necessary for engaging in the innovation process. The three essential organizational capabilities are: creative abrasion (the ability to generate ideas through intellectual discourse and debate); creative agility (the ability to test and refine ideas through quick pursuit); and creative resolution (the ability to make decisions in an integrative manner).

Those who are exceptional at leading from behind are likely to be different than those who excelled at leading from the front. And this raises the question: are we identifying and developing the leaders who can tap the power of collective genius?

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