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IS A HERO OF THE CHILEAN MINING DISASTER WORKING FOR YOU?

Getting distributed leadership working for you

1. Have a compelling purpose that galvanises people to action. As a manager, ensure your reports are clear about outcomes. As a leader, try and align individual aspirations with team goals. That means you'll need to know the people you are wanting to influence.
2. Distribute roles based on expertise. We usually attribute leadership to others on the basis of perceived expertise. If our people are operating in their areas of strength we are more likely to trust and follow them.
3. 'Heroes' who try and hang on to power as sole leader kill distributed leadership. Distributing leadership within a team means becoming an effective follower when needed. Leading and following are like two sides of a coin. Both of these primary roles play make their own unique, essential and complementary contribution to team performance.
4. Make the distinction between managing and leading. Managers are formally appointed and they are ultimately accountable too. However, as well as the manager, anyone else in the team can step into a leading role. Members who influence others towards a common goal are leading. Teams that have more people who exercise leadership fare much better than teams who have less people willing to step up. Encourage your people to step up and lead as often as possible.

The incredible rescue

Like more than a billion others around the globe, the UGM team was recently transfixed by the Chilean 'Los 33' rescue effort. We were riveted as the capsule carrying self-appointed cameraman, 31 year old Florencio Avalos, disappeared upwards from the underground cave into the narrow steel-clad shaft at 23.55 local time. There were many emotions, including relief and jubilation, as he surfaced safely after only 15 mins. Twenty-two hours later, a globally-shared joy as last-out, shift boss Luis Urzúa, emerged from the rescue capsule.

This epic drama that had such an awful beginning but a near fairytale ending provides the context for many stories. Some, such as details about those desperate first 17 days, may never emerge if the miners "blood pact" holds. Others, including the physical, and particularly the psychological impact of entombment, have yet to unfold. One which has emerged somewhat 'between the lines' is the style of leadership that played such a vital role in survival underground, and in rescue effort above ground.

Not a story about hero leaders

Among the first few words uttered by Chilean President Sebastian Piñera to Urzúa were, "*You have been a great boss*". As the 'Chief Survival Officer', Urzúa, and the 'Chief Rescue Officer', Piñera, embraced, the BBC commentator noted that "*the boss below ground [is] hugging the boss above ground*". On thanking the President, in the same breath Urzúa also thanked the many rescuers and the people of Chile. Responding, President Piñera reiterated that Urzúa was "*the last one out, like a good captain*". The President also immediately gave thanks and credit to "*the thousands of people who helped in this*". This story, clearly, is not just about two heroes but the thousands who contributed.

The title of 'boss' afforded to these two men is particularly appropriate. Each was appointed as the most senior manager of their respective subterranean and surface missions. But news reports started inappropriately substituting the term 'leader' for 'boss'. They implied these terms are interchangeable.

Leading and managing are separate endeavours

A compelling lesson from this momentous rescue is that leading and managing are separate endeavours. Thankfully Urzúa and Piñera demonstrated both. However, the miners survived and the rescue effort succeeded because many, without the 'boss' title, exercised leadership. And the latter could never have been possible, if others had not also chosen to *follow* effectively. Bosses were involved, but above and below ground there were many more who exercised outstanding leading and outstanding following, as required by the ever-changing context.

The triumph of distributing leadership

Looking beyond the safe rescue of 33 people from mortal danger, a real hero and triumph in this story is the role of 'distributed leadership'. Both below and above ground the crisis would have initially precipitated strong sole-leader type responses. It's an appropriate and usually most efficient first response.

Emerging evidence suggests that following the initial chaos a much more distributed style of leadership prevailed at many levels. The survivors, the rescuers, and even the families and Chilean people showed a preference for distributed- rather than hero-leadership. We'll focus on the trapped miners.

Entombed hundreds of metres below the surface, the men quickly realised that they were in their life-threatening situation together. Individual responses (squabbles, despair, fear of starvation) to the crisis gave way to a more team-oriented approach.

Instead of anarchy there was order, underpinned by democracy. Everyone had equal value. "*Everything was voted on... We were 33 men, so 16 plus one was a majority*," recounted Urzúa. Fellow survivor, Richard Villaroel, told reporters, "*We all agreed that we would all share the food that was there*." They committed to working together to survive. They accepted also that, ultimately, their fate might be to die of starvation together, having given hope its best chance through cooperation.

Contributing, belonging and commitment

A key to the miners relatively good mental health was their strong sense of commitment to fellow miners. This was accomplished in large part through the virtuous contributing-belonging cycle they managed to sustain. Members were allocated roles perceived as contributing to their own and others well being. On completing these valued tasks, their personal sense of belonging and team bonds grew.

Mario Gomez highlighted the importance of roles. "*We all had our roles and that's how we survived*". Many of these roles were leader roles and tapped personal expertise. For example, Urzúa played an influential part in developing the system. Gomez called him the "*organiser*". Jose Henriquez, the lay preacher, took charge of spirituality. Yonni Barrios was "*the doctor*", his very basic medical knowledge greater expertise than anyone else. Engineer Raul Bustos redirected water away from the sleeping area and flushed waste deeper underground.

Even in the face of extreme pressure the miners chose distributed over hero leadership. Gomez commented, "*We are not heroes, we're just ordinary men who are grateful to be alive*." Why is it that bosses in many 'ordinary' workplaces want to be heroes, often at the expense of everyone else? When they do this they discourage leading and following.