



## Leadership: An Earned Peerage

*by Jon Craighead*

*“I used to think that running an organization was equivalent to conducting a symphony orchestra. But I don't think that's quite it; it's more like jazz. There is more improvisation.”*  
— Warren Bennis

In the 1960s folk singer Pete Seeger asked in the first line of his famous song, “Where have all the flowers gone, long time passing?” Later, in 1989, the late management guru Warren Bennis, pioneer of the contemporary field of leadership studies, asked a similar question: “Where have all the leaders gone, long time passing?” His astute observation of the scarcity of leadership in politics, business, government, and in communities everywhere is still valid, and his question is as pertinent today as it was twenty-six years ago.

This article is an opportunity to examine the concept of leadership for insights to address this scarcity and as a means to countermand this reoccurring undesirable and debilitating circumstance. This inquiry provides a platform to explore the purpose of leadership – i.e. what’s possible when it’s present, and unavailable when missing.

It is important to note that leadership does not have a one-size-fits-all definition. Any description of leadership often represents the speaker’s or writer’s view. Some examples of attempts by thought leaders to define leadership are as follows:

Management expert Howard Garner states: “Leaders have a significant role in creating a state of mind that is the society. They can serve as symbols of the moral unity of the society. They can express the values that hold the society together. Most importantly, they can ideally achieve and articulate goals that lift people out of their petty preoccupations, carry them above behaviors that tear a society apart, and unite them in pursuit of objectives worthy of their best efforts.”

Peter Drucker, renowned father of modern management, offers this simple distinction in defining leadership: “Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.” Other leadership scholars have variously defined leaders and the role of leadership as the following:

- one who sets challenging goals and has the ability to attract constituents to share those pursuits;
- leaders must be trusted and respected;
- leaders can focus with a deepening sense of purpose, navigate through complexity and emotion with resilience;

- one who has the ability to make considered decisions and come to sensible conclusions routinely.

Each of us has our individual definitions of what leadership really is – some may come to mind as you read this article – which makes it difficult to deliver a universally all-encompassing consensus definition.

That said, today's leader is a person of influence rather than a power broker. For the purpose of clarity, this article focuses on leadership in the role of leading people toward a designated successful outcome or goal. This is so because most often leadership requires partners to get things done; otherwise it is a solitary effort, absolutely worthwhile but not the classic leadership description used in this inquiry. This assessment of leadership is realized when leaders empower teams to use their skills to accomplish a set of outcomes that otherwise would not happen.

Leadership is a learned behavior which is influenced by a person's traits, skills, beliefs and values. These characteristics contribute to the process of leadership development and effectiveness. For example, a leader might have learned skills in counseling others, but her traits will play a great role in determining how she counsels. Another person who has empathy will make a better counselor than a person who thinks employees are there to do his bidding.

Another dimension of leadership, often overlooked, is followership. In her book Followership: How Followers Are Creating Change and Changing Leaders, Barbara Kellerman states, "The age of the all-powerful executive has ended. Followers the world over are getting bolder and more strategic – which is why leaders who dismiss them or discount them do so at their peril." She supports her assertion with examples of followers who have initiated momentous changes and influence from the bottom up. The implication is that leaders are no longer automatically granted unquestioned authority but are respected for competence, collegially and accomplishments.

In summary, today's demand for leadership goes far beyond a coronation of entitlement; rather, it is a position that one only earns with subject expertise and the ability to successfully empower others.