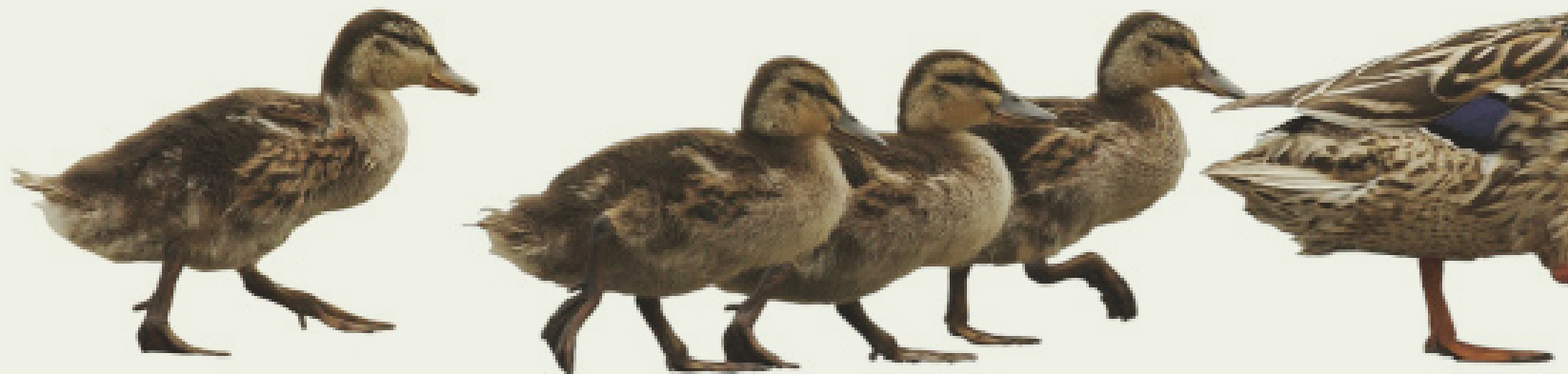


The Maxwell Fallacy: There's More to Leadership than Influence

David Burkus



Leadership is perhaps the hardest concept to define.

Warren Bennis once wrote, “It is almost a cliché of the leadership literature that a single definition of leadership is lacking.” Author Joseph Rost commented on this dilemma by writing “The scholars do not know what they are studying, and the practitioners do not know what they are doing.” One group of scholars attempted to compile and synthesize the multitude of leadership definitions and encountered more than 90 dimensions. The definition they created from this synthesis is over 600 words long.

Yet despite the superfluous word counts and definitional dilemmas, one author and popular speaker has popularized the idea that leadership can be defined in one word: Influence.

John Maxwell, often billed as America’s foremost authority on leadership, has made his career around the phrase: “Leadership is influence; nothing more, nothing less.” This key phrase has guided the writing of the most prolific leadership author in America and influenced the work of countless others. As a result, it is perhaps the commonly accepted definition of leadership.

It’s brief. It’s pithy. It’s wrong.

Like most commonly accepted notions, it is an over-simplification of the definition. It is incorrect precisely because it is too simple. It permits too many to claim the title of leader and at the same time prohibits observers from judging between good leadership and bad leadership. It is a simple, but incomplete definition of leadership.

It is a good start, but Maxwell’s fallacy is made by stopping there.

There’s more to leadership than influence.

¿Salespeople are Leaders?

A few years ago, I was invited to a special presentation. I was offered a three-night, all expenses paid vacation in the Caribbean. The only stipulation was that on Day Three of the vacation, I had to listen to a special presentation about the resort I was staying at.

I declined. As I am sure you would too.

We decline these almost too good to be true offers because we know what happens during the special presentation. We have to sit and listen to a pitch for time-shares. The presenters will try to convince us to shell out several thousands dollars for the right to stay one week a year at the resort we just previewed.

Their job is to influence us to pay for a time-share. In fact, all salespeople have the same job description: influence. Sales is a process of influencing prospective customers to become customers. Consider some simple Logic:

Major Premise: “Leadership is influence.”

Minor Premise: Salespeople influence others.

Conclusion: Salespeople are leaders.

But are they? Very few people would agree with this conclusion. More often than not, salespeople are not leaders. So there must be an error somewhere in our syllogism.

Indeed there is: in our major premise.

We are forced to conclude that salespeople are leaders unless we change our major premise. Unless we add something to our definition that screens them out, we have to let them in.

Bad Leaders

Shortly after any political or corporate scandal, the talk on the media immediately shifts to a discussion on bad leadership. Indeed, Jeffrey Skilling was a bad leader of Enron. This brings on a never-ending debate about how we distinguish between good leaders and bad leaders. In our mind, we can easily cite good leaders from bad leaders. If you cannot, here a helpful comparison:

Martin Luther King Jr. versus Hitler

It's not hard to come to the conclusion that MLK was a good leader and Hitler was a bad leader.

Unless you are using a simple, Maxwellian definition of leadership.

If leadership is influence, then good leaders are very influential and bad leaders are not. But here is where it gets messy. If you are not good at influencing people, then you are also not a leader. So under the Maxwell description: there are no bad leaders.

Yet there stands Hitler in contrast to MLK, or Gandhi, or George Washington. Clearly Hitler was a bad leader, but the popular definition prevents us from labeling him as such. It becomes obvious, then, that we are not using good or bad in relation to skill, but as something else.

We need a more expansive definition. One that allows us to block out timeshare salespeople and insane strong men from being classified as good leaders.

There's more to leadership than influence.

Stronger, Yet Still Simple

At this point, you are bound to be thinking that timeshare salespeople and insane strong men are extreme examples. However, this is exactly my point. These two examples are certainly outliers, but they are still valid.

And because they are valid, the Maxwell definition is invalid. It is a valid foundation, but too weak to stand against these outliers.

The challenge, then, is to create a strong definition that is equally simple. This definition should incorporate Maxwell's thinking on leadership, yet eliminate the extreme outliers of leadership. It should be as simple as Maxwell's, but it should be able to withstand the criticisms we just explored.

Perhaps, it should be this:

Leadership is the process of influencing others to work toward a mutually desired vision.

Leaders, then, recruit and influence followers to work together to make a shared vision reality. This definition is not as simple as Maxwell's, but it is simple. It does incorporate the emphasis on influence that inspired Maxwell's infamous maxim. Furthermore, it stands strong against our previously discovered criticisms. It locks out salespeople and tyrants.

Salespeople are not leaders in our mind, nor in this definition. They certainly influence. However their goal is not to influence customers to work. Salespeople influence prospects to become customers, to pay for said product or service. However, buying is not working. (And isn't the reason we spend money for things that we do not want to work for them).

This definition makes it possible to give Hitler the title he deserves: bad leader. Certainly, Hitler possessed a talent for rallying people to work. He was a charismatic leader, an icon. I am told there was even a Hitler action figure. However, the vision they worked toward was Hitler's alone and not one that most expected or desired. At some point, even Hitler's followers realized that he was not taking them where they thought they were going.

Leadership is the process of influencing others to work toward a mutually desired vision.

We can use this definition to eliminate non-leader influencers (unless they follow you, or work toward the vision you cast). We can use this definition to discriminate between good and bad leaders (are followers working toward a future they actually desire?).

Leadership is the process of influencing others to work toward a mutually desired vision.

With the simple addition of a few words, we've made Maxwell's motto stronger and expanded our conceptualization of leadership. 📖



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