

# HOW PROFICIENCY IN THE SEVEN LEADERSHIP ROLES CAN LEAD TO BOTTOM-LINE RESULTS

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## How Proficiency in the Seven Leadership Roles Can Lead to Bottom-line Results

### *Abstract*

What is it that makes a leader effective? Some leaders oversupervise, and some undersupervise—but the most successful know where each of their employees stand and how to address the individual need of each. Effective leadership is definitely not “one-size-fits-all.”

This article tells you how to match your level of supervision to your employee’s level of need. It outlines the roles of a leader—sponsor, educator, coach, supporter, counselor, and confrontor—and provides you with the tools you need to know when to step into each role.

Timing and insight are everything to world-class leaders. Let this article lead you to bottom-line results as you fill your many important roles. When leaders provide what the employees cannot provide for themselves, win-win situations are inevitable.



## How Proficiency in the Seven Leadership Roles Can Lead to Bottom-line Results

*Kathryn E. Jackson Ph.D.*

I'm usually a catalog kind of shopper. But, the other day I had to buy some boots and I haven't had much luck buying shoes from a catalog (that's my fault—not theirs). So, I went to the mall. Not only did I get a marvelous pair of boots, but I also got a remarkable lesson in leadership.

I took a couple of minutes to sit in the food court with a cup of coffee and watch the human drama around me. I learned more about leadership skills in those few minutes than I have learned in some seminars and books dedicated to the subject.

I watched children react to their parents. If the parent used the "wrong" approach at the "wrong" time, I could see the pain, confusion and displeasure on the face of the child. For example, there were times during my brief period of observation that a child needed comfort and the parent disciplined. Other times, a child needed to try something on his own and the parent kept lecturing. I began to observe that many parents got stuck in one approach and didn't know how to vary their approach according to the child's needs.

While sitting in the food court, I pondered this "getting stuck." It seemed to me that parents get stuck for a couple of reasons. First, the parent may not know there are other options available. Second, they may have had a role model (their parents) who only knew one way to do things. Third, they may have gotten comfortable using one role and never learned the skills required for any other.

Returning to my observation, I looked for a parent who matched his or her approach to the needs of the child. The results were dramatically different. The child did not like what was going on, but their face indicated a lot less resistance, a little understanding and some level of acceptance. From my food court experience I started asking corporate questions. Do we know our options as corporate leaders? Do we know how to match the needs of our people with the appropriate leadership approach? Do we, as leaders, "get stuck?" Following are my ruminations on these matters.

### *Needs-focused Leadership*

Just like the parents I observed in the food court, I believe corporate leaders have three choices. We can:

- oversupervise (i.e., provide what the person does not need)
- undersupervise (i.e., not provide what the person does need)
- match the developmental needs of our people (Response Design has named this "Needs-focused Leadership")

#### *Oversupervision*

Consider the parent who kept lecturing when the child was ready to practice. This parent oversupervised because they were providing something the child didn't need. They stayed in a role (educator) beyond the time necessary (the child needed a coach).

In the corporate world, oversupervision is providing what the employee does not need by staying in a leadership role beyond the time necessary. Imagine an agent who is skilled at using the telephone system. Then imagine a leader who, during each weekly meeting, gives a lecture on how to transfer a call. After each meeting he or she

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sits with the agent and asks the agent to demonstrate how to transfer a call. The agent has never failed the demonstration, yet the leader persists in weekly lectures and skill tests. This illustrates the leader who oversupervises. Over-supervisors never let up even though the skill is mastered. They don't know how to move on.

When employees are oversupervised, they get angry and frustrated. They stop taking risks. They stop trying. They work at getting even. They stop making independent decisions, and their initiative goes down. They may withdraw or leave.

#### *Undersupervision*

Now think of the child described above who needed comfort and the parent disciplined. This parent undersupervised because she skipped a step. The child had wandered away from the parent. That's scary for both child and parent. The parent, reacting to fear, disciplined in anger. This anger was difficult for the child to grasp because he was just as frightened as the parent. Instead of discipline, the child needed comfort. This primary need of the child went unmet.

Undersupervision occurs in corporations when leaders skip roles and the primary needs of the employee are unmet. Suppose you hire a new employee and during new hire training all you say is, "We sell widgets over the phone. Here are the product's features and benefits. I know you can do it. Now get on that phone and sell, sell, SELL!" Obviously, this example is an exaggeration, but it illustrates a leader who undersupervises. He or she may be a great educator (able to transfer the knowledge) but may never allow the employee time to practice the skills in a controlled environment. (He or she skipped coaching.)

When people are undersupervised, they fail because they do not get what they need. They get angry and frustrated and stop taking risks.

#### *Matching Development*

Leaders create a win-win situations when they match the employee's developmental level. This means the leader provides what the employee cannot provide for himself or herself. In order to do this, leaders must understand the different roles required by the different needs of people and situations.

## **Needs-focused Leadership Roles**

#### *Sponsor*

*(The goal of sponsoring is to promote a star achiever throughout the entire corporation.)*

When an employee is a star achiever it usually means he or she can make a special contribution to the company. The leader promotes this outstanding skill by sponsoring. The emphasis of sponsoring is the long-term development of the employee and his or her contribution to the company. Sponsoring has a future focus and is a time of polishing and fine-tuning already strong skills. The outcome of sponsoring is greater experience for the employee and perhaps promotion. Leaders who sponsor must be skilled at getting rid of bureaucracy, dismantling barriers to performance, developing good relationships, letting go of control, treating people like adults, listening, communicating, giving feedback and motivating.

#### *Educate*

*(The goal of educating is to impart knowledge.)*

A leader educates in three different scenarios: when goals, roles or business conditions change; when new responsibilities require new skills; or when a newcomer needs orientation. The leader's tone is always positive and supportive. The teacher constantly emphasizes the need to learn and apply new knowledge. The outcome



of educating is that the employee acquires new information, increases his or her confidence and receives a broadened perspective on the company.

#### *Coach*

*(The goal of coaching is to help the employee acquire skill.)*

After the employee has sufficient knowledge to begin practicing the skills required by the task, the leader will coach to make simple, brief performance corrections. The coach is always encouraging, enthusiastic, prepared, and able to explain the change required. The employee becomes more confident, increases in skill and demonstrates better performance after coaching. The coach has an eye for recognizing real-life “learning laboratories.” The coach is able to express genuine appreciation, treat people like adults, listen, communicate, give plenty of feedback and continually motivate the members of his or her team.

#### *Support*

*(The goal of supporting is to help the employee gain confidence.)*

Some employees lack confidence even after they have mastered all the required skills and knowledge. When this happens, the leader enters the support role. In this role, the leader is encouraging, supportive and motivational. The leader helps the employee take the calculated risks necessary to gain confidence. He or she focuses on the **effort** made by the employee, not on the **result** of the effort. When a leader supports an employee, he or she enhances the employees’ confidence and they exhibit better performance. Leaders who support must be good listeners and communicators. They must be able to set up limited risks for the employees, give constant positive feedback and continually motivate the employees to keep trying.

#### *Counsel*

*(The goal of counseling is to identify the cause of a performance gap and determine corrective action.)*

There may be times when performance is lacking, even though the employee has mastered all the skills and knowledge required by the job. The leader will assume the counseling role to respond to these setbacks and disappointments and speed recovery. The counselor will always focus on problem solving. He or she will be positive, supportive and encouraging. He or she will readily engage in a two-way discussion about the performance gap. The desired results of counseling are an enhanced sense of ownership and accountability on the part of the employee, a renewed commitment and a turnaround in the employee’s performance.

#### *Confront*

*(The goal of confronting is to further define the cause of a chronic performance gap, the actions required to correct it, the time frame for the actions and possible options if not corrected.)*

Sometimes an employee may seem unable to meet expectations despite education, coaching and counseling. When performance problems persist and an individual is failing in his or her current role, then the leader must confront the issues. Leaders must confront using a positive, supportive and firm tone. There is a clear focus on the behalf of the leader that a decision about the employee’s future must be made and there is a clear definition of the time frame for that decision. There are several possible outcomes of confronting (these are called “Options” in the Needs-focused Diagram explained below). The employee may turn their performance around. Or, the employee may be reassigned and given the chance to succeed in another position. The current job might be restructured, eliminating certain responsibilities or expectations. Or, the employee may be dismissed from the company. The ability to discuss sensitive issues without over-emotionalizing them is the primary skill of a leader who confronts well.

## **Task-Specific**

Needs-focused Leadership is not only a person-specific model, but it is also a task-specific model. For example, let’s say Sue is a veteran sales agent. Her sales performance is outstanding. Your role with her has been to

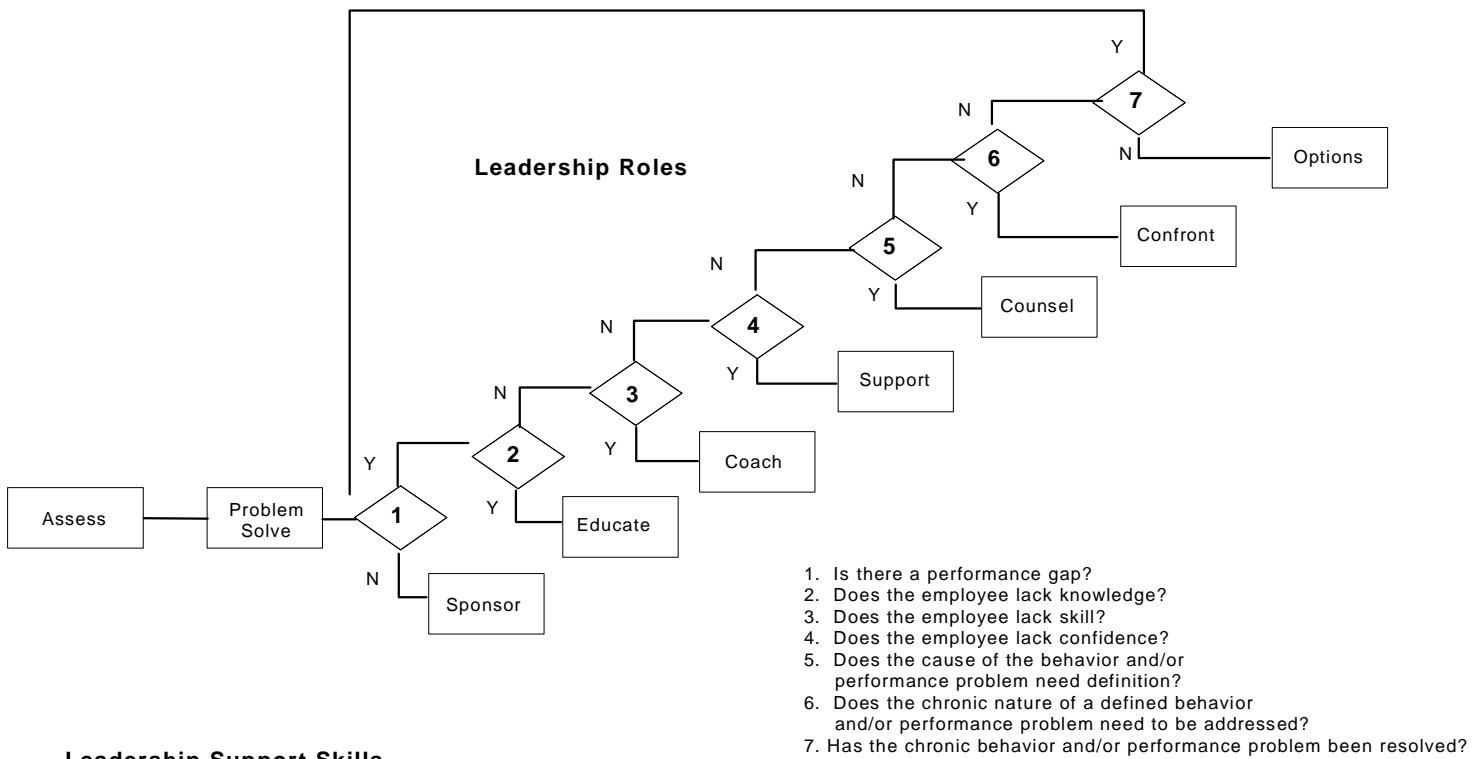


sponsor her since she has clearly mastered the skills and knowledge required by her sales job. However, she was just assigned a project to analyze a new piece of sales automation software. In this scenario, while she is working as a sales agent you retain your sponsor role. When she works on this new project you may need to adopt a new role of educator, coach or counselor (depending on her needs as she progresses through the project). Therefore, as a needs focused leader you may be adopting multiple roles even with the same person.

## The Needs-focused Leadership Diagram

The Needs-focused Leadership diagram does three things. First it identifies the skills required to be a needs-focused leader. Second, it teaches leaders how to decide what leadership role to assume. Third, it ensures leaders don't get stuck in one role.

Needs-focused Leadership Diagram



### Leadership Support Skills





### *Required Skills*

The Needs-focused Leadership diagram calls the required skills the “support skills.” These are represented by: treating employees as adults, motivating, listening, communicating, assessment, problem solving and giving feedback. These are “support skills” because you use these skills (in varying intensity) for each and every role.

Once you have mastered these seven support skills you have mastered the foundational skills required to be an expert in each of the six roles.

### *Leadership Roles*

The leadership roles are sponsor, educate, coach, support, counsel and confront. The order of the diagram helps you determine what role you should assume for each employee and each task and keeps you from getting stuck.

For each employee (and each task to which they are assigned) you will ask—in this order:

1. Is there a performance gap?
2. Does the employee lack knowledge?
3. Does the employee lack skill?
4. Does the employee lack confidence?
5. Does the cause of the behavior and/or performance problem need definition?
6. Does the chronic nature of a defined behavior and/or performance problem need to be addressed?
7. Has the chronic behavior and/or performance problem been resolved?

By asking the questions in this order, a leader knows that he or she has done everything possible to ensure the success of the employee. The leader knows that the employees have not been penalized and that he or she has not skipped a leadership step or gotten stuck in one role.

*Assuming the Roles (Please follow the Needs-focused Leadership diagram.)*

If the answer to Question 1 (Is there a performance gap?) is “no”, then the leader assumes the sponsor role. If the answer to Question 1 is “yes,” then the leader asks Question 2.

Whenever a “no” is given to Questions 2 through 6 then the leader responds by asking the next question.

If the answer is “yes” to Questions 2 through 6, then the leader responds to the employee and the situation accordingly:

- Yes to Question 2 (Does the employee lack knowledge?) means the leader will educate.
- Yes to Question 3 (Does the employee lack skill?) means the leader will coach.
- Yes to Question 4 (Does the employee lack confidence?) means the leader will support.
- Yes to Question 5 (Does the cause of the behavior and/or performance problem need definition?) means the leader will counsel.
- Yes to Question 6 (Does the chronic nature of a defined behavior and/or performance problem need to be addressed?) means the leader will confront.

When the leader gets to Question 7, he or she responds to a “yes” or “no” answer as described below.

- No to Question 7 (Has the chronic behavior and/or performance problem been resolved?) means the leader will consider the options described previously in this article.
- Yes to Question 7 (Has the chronic behavior and/or performance problem been resolved?) means the leader starts back with Question 1.



## Warnings

Two warnings about the roles:

### *First warning*

There are no clear boundaries between these roles. Often you will find yourself educating when you are wearing your coaching hat. Or you may need to counsel when offering support. Employees' needs have no clear boundaries--that means, neither do the leadership roles.

### *Second warning*

Don't try to take a linear approach to the roles. Don't think you can start at "Assess" on the diagram and go neatly through each step with each person until you end up at "Sponsor." Employee development is not that simple! Our employees and our companies will provide plenty of opportunities to be creative and practice flexibility.

## Conclusion

Unlike the children in the food court, your employees probably won't give you funny looks (at least not to your face) when you "get stuck" or "skip steps" with them. However if they aren't producing the results you or your organization want, you might want to take a closer look at your leadership skills and roles.

Are you oversupervising some employees while undersupervising others? Are you matching the development needs of each individual with the appropriate leadership role? Are you adapting to the person **and** the task (remember, Sue the telemarketer)? Do you need a mentor to help you master the support skills? It may be worth an investment. Your long-term success as a leader depends on it.

Kathryn Jackson, co-founder of Response Design Corporation (RDC) and call center expert helps professionals get more from their call center. Response Design is the how-to source for integrating the call center into the customer relationship. Its independent consultants use call center web seminars, contact center consulting, call center tutorials, call center benchmarking, world class customer service articles, and best-in-class customer service practices to ensure you get the most from your call center investment.

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