



Leadership Behaviors: #2 Work Sampling

By Jamie Daniels

This is the second in a seven-part series exploring effective leadership behaviors. Dr. Aubrey C. Daniels and James E. Daniels, co-authors of Measure of a Leader, explore seven behaviors and offer insight into how to develop these behaviors.

Leadership is usually thought of in terms of the qualities and attributes of the person assuming that role. So what gets studied and written about are the leader's personal history, thoughts, expressions and actions as if they are the essentials. But leadership is explicitly about a relationship between that leader and his/her followers. Classical studies implied something similar to a Master-Servant relationship. In our era, the use of coercion by leaders is increasingly challenged,

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forcing a re-evaluation of some of those time-honored premises which are quickly becoming irrelevant. No credible study of leadership can ignore those being led.

A leader-follower relationship is seldom one of equals. The farther the follower is from the leader organizationally, the more asymmetrical that relationship becomes. In legendary leaders such as Napoleon, there were followers who felt a very strong relationship with the leader even though the leader was unaware of the followers' existence. This same relationship can be seen in today's American presidential campaigns where campaign workers, who have never met the candidate, become so emotionally involved with their leader's success that they are profoundly affected by the election's outcome. While you may not think of achieving that level of leadership, the principle is the same; the most effective leaders cultivate a relationship with their followers.

But what sort of relationship and how do we do this? Any relationship is a complex mixture of many different parts. For our purposes we will only focus on the part of the relationship

where the follower cares about the goals and aspirations of the leader and the leader's success. And we will discuss how to develop this in followers. One part of the answer can be found in the practice of work sampling.

General Stanley McChrystal, America's Combat Commander in Afghanistan, in a TED talk entitled "[Listen, learn...then lead](#)," suggested that building a shared purpose was a fundamental task of leadership and especially where the tasks and goal were difficult. He suggested that face-to-face communication was essential, especially with key actors in challenging situations. Maintaining their belief in the mission and the leader, when under stress, was critical to the followers' performance and success. While you will probably never lead people on life-threatening tasks, you should keep this concept in mind and apply it to your critical work processes. Work sampling is one version we suggest using.

Work sampling is a practice where the leader observes the follower as the follower completes various job-related tasks and the follower is aware of the observation. At its best it affords an opportunity for an exchange of views between leader and follower regarding the efficacy and meaningfulness of the task and/or the process. Rarely will anyone have a fuller understanding of the complexities of a job more completely than the person actually performing that job. Many people, once having held that or a similar job, come to believe that they "know" what the job is and what it requires. They ignore the fact that our environment is always changing. Even in mature industries where there is little that is new in

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the tasks performed, there will be changes—both subtle and important. Changes to inputs such as new suppliers, a new mixture of raw materials, changes to lighting or adjustments to aging machinery, will often change the actual work being performed. While it may look similar, it could be very different from past practices. Similarly changes in management or in team members will alter both practice and perception, making work either more difficult or easier. You cannot assume to know what another person is, or should be doing without some effort on your part to recalibrate your knowledge.

This is not to say that you should know, in detail, the job of all your subordinates. That is a task for your chain-of-command. But if you have incorrect information or an antiquated understanding of what you are asking your followers to do, you may find your plans jeopardized.

Your starting point should be with your direct reports. If you are a front line supervisor and you are experienced in the work and the process, this is usually a simple and quick task. You observe closely the actual behaviors and outputs in real time, noting the effort and the skill put into the task. You spend the time needed to evaluate that task's effectiveness and that performer's skills. If you are new to your job or the performer is new to the task, you are seeking to learn the critical behaviors that the task calls for.

The higher you are in the organization, the less routine the behavior you are observing. A vice president of sales, for example, will have to find occasion to observe his subordinate interacting with his direct reports. Because the sales manager's behavior is more varied, you will have to clarify your own thoughts about your expectations regarding what to look for. What interactions do you expect to see? How do you expect the sales manager to interact with her subordinates? What kind of behavior

do you see in those subordinates? What does this say about how they respond to the sales manager? While the list of behaviors you could see are numerous, you should focus on just a few that will help you evaluate that interaction. Are subordinates being led or coerced? Can you see evidence of discretionary effort on the part of those subordinates? Are your priorities and values clear to everyone? Do these people take ownership of their goals and do they show evidence that they share your purpose? Do they know what they are doing and why they are doing it?



Work sampling below the level of your direct reports can be very informative and helpful. It is one way of telling if organizational goals and values are aligned throughout the organization. The further down the organization's structure you go, the easier it is to see the effectiveness of the intervening layers of management and their ability to keep your goals and values in focus. But the further you go down that chain of command, the easier it becomes to disrupt the organization's ability to be effective. In order to avoid creating confusion and discontent, we offer a few suggestions.

1. If the person observed is not your direct report, do not correct them unless their behavior is unsafe or destructive. Use the information you gain to coach your direct reports so that they can make effective corrections.
2. Let the observed person's supervisor guide you when reinforcing. You could very easily reinforce behavior the supervisor is trying to correct, creating an even more difficult task for them.
3. Ask questions designed to allow the performer to demonstrate their abilities, not to catch their deficiencies.
4. Be impressed by small things but don't make a big deal out of routine behaviors.
5. Share what you learn with your direct reports, especially those things done well.

Expect them to communicate your findings with their direct reports.

Remember that the point of this behavior, work sampling, is to build a relationship with followers and to create a sense of common purpose and urgency for the organization's mission and values. Use this practice to create a sense in the person observed that you do, in fact, know and understand their contributions. When they believe you know what they do and how well they do it, you will find they are more open to challenges and more responsive to your calls for action. You will also find that others, seeing which behaviors get recognized by the leader, will adopt those same behaviors.



[About the Author]

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Jamie Daniels is a former leader and long-time associate of Aubrey Daniels International, having developed productivity and quality improvement systems for corporations in the

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