

Painting the Landscape as a Leader

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A search of Google Scholar results in 3.5 million hits for the keyword “leadership.” Clearly leadership is something that scholars in the organizational sciences have been studying for a long time. The vast majority of those studies, however, are studies of how leaders impact a *person*. How can a boss lend structure to a person’s work through goals and direction? How can a supervisor build rapport with a person by caring and listening? How can a manager reward a person in a way that creates a sense of merit? How can a team leader give a person a sense of vision and purpose? All of these questions are important and the best leaders have answers to all of them.

And yet, those questions miss a critical piece of the leadership equation. A maxim of psychology is that individual behavior is a function of the person and the *situation*. I describe the situation surrounding the leader as his or her “leadership landscape.” It includes the mix of tasks a person is asked to perform. It also includes any constraints that may impinge on the performance of those tasks. The landscape includes the physical spaces within work gets done. It also includes the culture that pervades that corner of the organization. Taken together, these ingredients comprise the situation that shapes the behavior of the person—often in ways unbeknownst to the leader.

The best leaders view their leadership landscape as something they can change, not as a poor hand dealt to them by fate (or top management). They understand that a mix of tasks can be tweaked to provide more variety, more autonomy, or more significance to employees. That constraints can be removed if time and attention are focused on doing so. That if physical spaces can’t be directly altered, they can be worked around by changing where people are and what things affect “traffic patterns” within the office.

Most of all, the best leaders look at culture as something that can be forged through the direct management of what anthropologists call “cultural artifacts.” Those artifacts include symbols (logos, awards, wall hangings), language (sayings, jargon, acronyms), ceremonies (special occasions used to mark something), and practices (official policies and procedures). Employees see those things every day and wind up ascribing—whether consciously or subconsciously—some meaning to them. Much of that meaning revolves around the core values of the group—what really matters when the rubber meets the road. Shaping the culture therefore means managing the artifacts in the leader’s corner of the organization—in his or her team, unit, or department.

In the end, the best leaders become *artists*: they paint their landscapes by managing tasks, constraints, physical spaces, and cultures. When combined with all the things they do to influence a person, such leaders create a situation that helps the person thrive. All it takes is viewing the landscape as changeable and putting the thought, time, and effort into painting it.