

Leader vs. Manager: What's the Distinction?

by Craig Perrin

The Question

“What’s the difference between a leader and a manager?”

Well-worn as that question may be, it remains worth asking because times change, and leaders succeed when their words, decisions, and actions address prevailing conditions. We all suspect, for example, that solving today’s extraordinary problems will take someone other than the all-business manager who kept us on the tracks – and then ran us off the tracks – over the past few years.

To answer this and other questions, the AchieveGlobal research team set out to discover how leaders succeed – to isolate their central concerns and activities – in today’s business climate.

The Research

We defined a multi-phased process, exploring secondary and primary sources, to collect and analyze qualitative and quantitative data. To begin, we captured key themes from two years of articles in eight respected peer-reviewed journals from Europe, Asia, and the Americas.

We reviewed all article abstracts, read and summarized 80 full articles, and developed a provisional leadership model – a hypothesis, if you will – to guide the primary research.

We presented this early model to focus groups of executives and middle managers in a range of industries and the public sector. Their real-world experience confirmed some themes, added new ones, and helped refine the model for quantitative testing.

We then designed and launched an online survey in the United States, Mexico, India, China, Singapore, Germany, and the United Kingdom, gathering 971 responses from business and government leaders and associates. Respondents represented global and domestic-only organizations ranging from fewer than 500 to more than 25,000 employees.

The Findings

Our principal findings were 42 leadership practices¹ – some behavioral, some cognitive – required to meet key global leadership challenges isolated by the research:

- Cost pressures
- Competitors
- Improving customer satisfaction
- Technology challenges
- Driving sales growth
- Employee productivity
- Product/service innovation



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About Craig Perrin

As AchieveGlobal’s Director of Solution Development, Craig is a thought leader who works cross-functionally and with clients to guide creation of a range of responses to market needs. Since 1986 he has played a central role in developing the company’s flagship programs in leadership, sales, and customer service; co-authored two best-selling books; written many articles and position papers; and produced eLearning and video that have earned scores of national and international awards. In 1998, Craig was named Times Mirror Editor of the Year. Craig holds a B.A. and M.A. from San Francisco State University.

¹ We defined “practice” as a behavior or thought process, i.e. something a leader does, or about which he or she has evolving thoughts and feelings.



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We sorted the 42 practices into six categories, or “zones,” to form a comprehensive model of leadership in the 21st century.

The Leadership Zone Model



Statistical analysis confirmed that all six zones correlate very highly with each other, suggesting that the six zones triangulate on a larger leadership construct. In other words, the six-zone approach is very accurate.²

The Practices

As useful as statistics may be, most leaders will find greater use in the practices themselves – listed here with a short behavioral definition for each zone:

ZONE 1 – REFLECTION: Leaders assess their motives, beliefs, attitudes, and actions, asking, “How can I make sure my limitations don’t lead me to make poor decisions?” To succeed in this zone, leaders:

- Take responsibility for their own mistakes.³
- Seek the knowledge required to make sense of the big picture.
- Examine what role they play in the challenges that they face.
- Treat failure as a chance to learn and grow.

- Reflect often on their performance as a leader.
- Give serious consideration to opinions that differ from their own.
- Speak frankly with others to learn from them and build trust.

ZONE 2 – SOCIETY: Leaders apply principles such as fairness, respect, and “the greater good” to balance individual and group well-being. To succeed in this zone, leaders:

- Act ethically to serve the larger good, not just to obey the law.
- Encourage others to take socially responsible action.
- Openly challenge what they consider unethical decisions and actions.
- Take action to benefit others, not just themselves.
- Recognize and reward others based on merit, not on politics.
- Make fair decisions, even if they have a negative impact on themselves.
- Take steps to reduce environmental harm.

ZONE 3 – DIVERSITY: Leaders respect and leverage such basic differences as gender, ethnicity, age, nationality, and beliefs. To succeed in this zone, leaders:

- Strive to meet the needs of customers representing other cultures.
- Encourage collaboration among people from different groups.
- Display sensitivity in managing across cultural boundaries.
- Collaborate well with people very different from themselves.
- Effectively lead groups made up of very diverse people.
- Learn about the business practices of other cultures.
- Manage virtual teams with explicit customer-centric goals and practices.

² A full research report with detailed statistical analysis is available from AchieveGlobal. Among other statistical analyses, we tested the internal consistency and accuracy of this model by calculating a Cronbach’s alpha. This alpha value was .983, indicating a highly consistent and accurate description of leadership today (1.0 is perfect), and therefore a very reliable model.

³ The top-rated leadership practice in our survey.

ZONE 4 – INGENUITY: Leaders offer and execute practical ideas – and help others do the same – to create a climate in which innovation can thrive. To succeed in this zone, leaders:

- Help other people to adapt quickly to changes.
- Help groups to develop a shared picture of a positive future.
- Develop themselves with the goal of improving overall group capabilities.
- Solve real-world problems by thinking clearly and engaging others.
- Tell stories to motivate others toward strategic goals.
- Create a work environment in which innovation can thrive.
- Find ways to promote speed, flexibility, and innovation.

ZONE 5 – PEOPLE: Leaders connect with others on the human level shared by all to earn commitment, inspire effort, and improve communication. To succeed in this zone, leaders:

- Read a range of emotions in others and respond appropriately.
- Adapt to the leadership needs of different groups.
- Help others resolve issues of work-life balance.
- Make a daily effort to inspire the trust of customers and colleagues.
- Minimize the negative human impact of their decisions and actions.
- Build and maintain a cross-functional task network.
- Communicate well with customers and colleagues at all levels.

ZONE 6 – BUSINESS: Leaders develop strategies, make and execute plans and decisions, organize the work of others, and guide effort toward predicted results. To succeed in this zone, leaders:

- Adapt quickly to changing business conditions.

- Manage the costs of operation.
- Learn new ways to make the business competitive.
- Develop and implement effective business plans.
- Analyze and use hard data to promote business results.
- Manage customer acquisition, retention, and lifetime value.
- Add clarity to their organization's vision and values.

The Answer Today

What answer do these findings offer for our earlier question about the difference between a leader and a manager?

An analogy may illustrate: The zone model suggests that the difference between a manager and a leader is very much like the difference between a raisin and a grape.

If a raisin is a grape with something vital missing – water – so a manager is a leader with many vital things missing. Through the lens of this model, a “manager” is competent primarily in one zone: *Business*. Managers make and execute plans and decisions, organize the work of others, and guide effort toward predicted results.

“Leaders” must do these things, too, but our study indicates that leaders also demonstrate other interests and abilities grouped in the model in the other five zones: *Reflection, Society, Diversity, Ingenuity, and People*.

Just as a raisin has vital nutritional value, a “manager” has vital organizational value. In fact, survey respondents at every level in every global region consistently rated the Business zone more highly than other zones – and for good reason: without business results, no one succeeds.

Business savvy alone is not enough

to meet the complex variety of 21st-century challenges:

- More complex problems demand greater *Reflection*.
- Sustainable long-term strategy must have a positive impact on *Society*.
- Large-scale efforts need to leverage *Diversity* in all its forms.
- *Ingenuity* drives innovation, which sharpens a competitive edge.
- Motivating *People* must involve their emotions as well as their minds.

By this definition, then, an effective 21st-century leader moves smoothly among the zones as conditions demand, leveraging strengths from each zone to address deficiencies and ultimately succeed in the other zones.

About AchieveGlobal

In the 21st century, the level of human skills will determine organization success. AchieveGlobal provides exceptional development in interpersonal business skills giving companies the workforce they need for business results. Located in over 40 countries, we offer multi-language, learning-based solutions—globally, regionally, and locally.

We understand the competition you face. Your success depends on people who have the skills to handle the challenges beyond the reach of technology. We're experts in developing these skills, and it's these skills that turn your strategies into business success in the 21st century.

These are things technology can't do. Think. Learn. Solve problems. Listen. Motivate. Explain. People with these skills have a bright future in the 21st century. AchieveGlobal prepares you for that world.



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