



“ Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

— Matthew 28:18-20

”

So, what is “leadership”? It’s is one of those terms that gets thrown around rather haphazardly. Depending on the speaker or the context, it can reference radically different concepts: persuasive influence, authoritative arm-twisting, organizational activity.

It can be defined as being vested in a particular individual, being shared within a group, or toggling back and forth between group and individual. It can be symbolic or concrete, structured or loose, forceful or gentle. It can be a relationship or a role. It can be goal-oriented or process-centered.

In his book *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century*, Joseph Rost asserted that “leadership is a word that has come to mean all things to all people.”¹⁴

In an attempt to simplify things, I went back to the basics: a plain old-fashioned dictionary, albeit the modern online version thereof: www.merriam-webster.com.

This is the definition of “leadership” that popped up:

- (1) the office or position of a leader,
- (2) the capacity to lead,
- (3) an act or instance of leading.

Okay, that’s a start. But even such a simple definition has its issues, in addition to problematically using forms of the term “lead” within the definition of leadership.

Definition (1) tells us that the only people in leadership are those with the official position of leader, something that you could print on a business card. And if leadership is defined by the ability to lead (definition 2), that necessarily implies that not everyone possesses the ability to lead. Finally (3) if you are not actively engaged in an officially sanctioned leadership position, then you are not actually a leader.

I did not find those definitions terribly helpful or illuminating. So, next I searched the dictionary for the definition of “leader.” A leader is ... are you ready for it? ... “a person or thing that leads.”

Yep. Thanks a lot for that clarification.

Is leadership really that vague, context-specific, and difficult to define? Together we’re going to find out! Over the next few days and weeks, we’ll be taking a deep look at leadership. What it means. Who leads, and how. And most importantly: why.

QUESTION:

If someone asked you right now to define “leadership” in less than 30 words, how would you answer?

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