

Time for Leadership

If you think management and leadership are one and the same, think again.

by *Kindra Gordon*, field editor

As a speaker on the topic of leadership, Rick LaPlante has a quip he likes his audiences to ponder: If you think you are leading, and you turn around and no one is behind you, you are just out for a walk.

So how do leaders garner a following and influence others? LaPlante says it begins by understanding there is a difference between management and leadership.

LaPlante describes management as “dealing with current complexities.” For example, he points out that beef producers “manage” grazing, herd health and breeding strategies for their operations.

Whereas, “Leadership is about change — creating the environment for change,” he notes.

To better understand the difference, LaPlante further explains that management is about predictability, reliability, control and efficiency in managing systems. He notes that managers want repeatable production outcomes; they don’t like different. Conversely, leadership is about change and movement among people and “creating a reality that wouldn’t likely exist without intervention.”

LaPlante has had firsthand experience in helping one major company and its employees recognize these differences. He had a successful 19-year career with Microsoft and guided development and differentiation between management and leadership roles. Today, LaPlante operates his own cattle company near Powell, Wyo., with his wife and family, and he has become a popular speaker on the topic of leadership at

ag industry events.

“Leadership is a totally different set of skills than management,” he says. “We don’t teach it (leadership) in high school or college, and we should.” He also notes that ranchers often take the time to transfer or teach skills like riding, roping and other traditions.

“We don’t spend a lot of time passing on leadership — and we should,” he says.

Leadership is ...

LaPlante says at the core of leadership is understanding that it is about people, as opposed to systems and processes.

He offers this analogy: Management relates to a system — the way you artificially inseminate (AI) or graze, which LaPlante points out deals with policies and procedures.

“People are involved in the system,” he explains. “You give management plans to people to do, but it’s not about the people.”

Leadership, he explains, is about thinking of the future and creating the scaffolding or structure for people to make innovative choices and do things differently.

“Leadership is all about change, messiness, risk, movement and creating desire,” he says. “It is always 100% about people.”

He adds, “Leadership is about trying something even if you don’t know the outcome, which is why leadership and management are often at odds.”

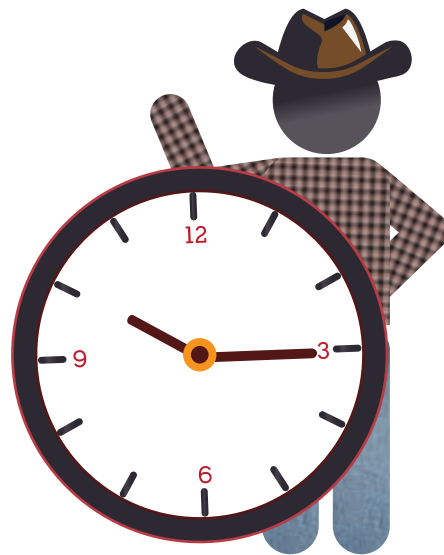
In a nutshell, LaPlante says, “Leadership is about intentionality — figuring out where you are headed.”

Learning leadership

With that said, LaPlante emphasizes that no one becomes a leader overnight. Specifically on a family ranch setting, LaPlante says, “You don’t become a leader when dad says, ‘I’m done. You’re in charge now.’”

LaPlante notes that leadership is an acquired skill developed over time, but he believes leadership is not unattainable.

He adds, “Having charisma is helpful, but it’s not required; anyone can be a leader.”



He also believes leadership can — and should — be developed and exist at all levels within an organization. LaPlante says, “Anyone can have a compelling vision of the future, not just one guy at the top. It’s important to get everybody in the game.”

To develop leadership skills, LaPlante suggests focusing on four key areas:

- **Business leadership**, which can also be defined as strategic planning. LaPlante says business leaders are constantly scanning the business environment to understand changes; these leaders ask “what if” and look for contingencies. He adds, “They evaluate business models and find opportunities.”
- **Organizational leadership**. LaPlante says the focus of organization leaders is people, including hiring the right people for the roles needed and wanting people who can see problems and suggest solutions. “Organizational leaders empower the organization to find their own solutions,” says LaPlante.
- **Operational or “production” leadership**. “These leaders focus on ‘how things are done,’” says LaPlante. He adds, “This is probably where most ranchers fit and excel. They ask: What should we be doing better in what we produce?” LaPlante emphasizes that it is important as a leader to engage employees in developing the solutions to these questions.
- **Individual leadership**. LaPlante notes that this is that age-old question: Is anyone listening? He adds that to be an effective leader you must be authentic. He adds, “The message you deliver has to be from the core. Authentic messages come from deeply held values and themes. Employees have to sense the leader’s passion.”

Of this list, LaPlante says, “Every leadership position requires a different mix of these four areas.” He notes that some businesses or

Avoid these assumptions

“The greatest problem with leadership is the appearance that it is happening,” says Rick LaPlante. To avoid that problem, he says the following four assumptions should never be made of employees:

- Don’t assume that they understood.
- Don’t assume that they agreed.
- Don’t assume that they cared.
- Don’t assume that they know what to do with the information.

organizations may need a strong business or strategy leader while others might need a leader who is stronger in one of the other areas.

As an example of this, LaPlante tells of a college Board of Trustees he served on where a new college president was hired prior to LaPlante joining the Board. The Board was not happy with how the president was working out. LaPlante says he assessed that the president was extremely intelligent, but was failing because he was the wrong fit and lacked the strong organizational leadership skills the college needed.

Bottom line, LaPlante says, is that leaders must motivate, inspire and influence thinking, creativity and engagement. He adds, “Strategic thinking is probably the most under-taught skill on the planet. So how do you engage the right thinkers?”

His answer: You can’t push them down when they share an idea. Otherwise, he says, it becomes like a game of Whack-A-Mole, and pretty soon people won’t pop their head up to share ideas.

Ready to change

As individuals ponder leadership for their business or organization, LaPlante likes to use a quote from Edward Deming, one of the leaders in thinking on process and management in the world — and he also

Recommended reads on leadership

Among Rick LaPlante’s favorite books on leadership are:

▶ *The Leader’s Voice: How Your Communication Can Inspire Action and Get Results*, by Ron Crossland and Boyd Clarke

▶ *Value Migration: How to Think Several Moves Ahead of the Competition*, by Adrian J. Slywotzky

▶ *Blue Ocean Strategy*, by W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne

▶ *Leading Change*, by John P. Kotter

was from Powell, Wyo., where LaPlante now resides.

Deming said, “Change is not required. Survival is not mandatory.”

LaPlante responds, “Think about that because leadership is about change. Leadership is about creating the environment for change. The challenge with leadership and management is people think they are the same thing, but they are fundamentally different on what they try to achieve and the processes to achieve them.”

LaPlante notes that in the farm and ranch business, owners often convince themselves that their businesses are not like other Fortune

500 companies, but he says the reality is farms and ranches do face the same issues other businesses do. He shares this: If you sell 500 head of calves annually, you are in the top 30% of businesses in the United States by revenue. Thus, he poses the question: “Are you running your business like the top 30% in the U.S.?”

He brings back the emphasis on leadership and says, “We cannot have world-class corporations without exceptional management. But, we cannot have even better or different world-class businesses if we don’t have [and implement] leadership.”

To move forward, LaPlante advises individuals to inventory the big challenges that face their business, and then:

1. Decide if those challenges require management or leadership.
2. Decide who is the right person to provide the leadership.
3. Decide if that individual has the skills to provide that leadership or how that person can get those skills.
4. Schedule time to provide the leadership to others on the team.

LaPlante concludes, “You have to make time for leadership.”



Editor’s Note: Kindra Gordon is a freelancer and cattlemaster from Whitewood, S.D.