

# Social Leadership

*Leading in a networked world.*



by Peter Friedman

LEADERSHIP IS CLASSICALLY defined as the function of a leader—one who guides, influences, or directs a group. But in a social media world of empowered consumers and employees, does the leader direct the group, or does the group guide the leader? Who leads whom?

**Social media changes the leadership equation.** Traditionally, leadership is deployed in the context of hierarchies, reinforced from and communicated through chain-of-command authority models. Even those who have risen to leadership through personal initiative and working around an organization generally have created or land in the point role of such a vertical structure. The leader has the power of voice. The followers are on the listening end.

Social media breaks this apart by empowering individuals and groups to communicate horizontally at higher velocity and greater momentum than a hierarchical model can keep up with. We call this leveling the playing field of voice. Leaders (people or companies) that continue to rely on vertical structures are increasingly eclipsed by the horizontal communications flow in social media. At the same time, social media, having connected almost everyone to everyone else, opens up new opportunities for leadership, although with a different framework.

**What's a leader to do?** The key principle of leadership today is to empower the group rather than tell it what to do. Stimulate groups to lead your goals for you, rather than do it yourself. To influence, you must listen. To lead, you must learn to follow. One is accountable for demonstrating leadership, not for having organizational authority. This means fostering a context in which people can interconnect, leverage each other, and move forward together.

In this new model, leaders create nurturing cultures that inspire people toward goals. They listen carefully and adjust the culture based on what they learn from the team. That is, they set the context for the group and then follow the group as it pursues goals. If

this sounds like management by walking around or agile development, that's because the core concepts are the same—just applied universally rather than at the edges of an organization.

## New Model for Leadership

We can look to social media key success factors to better understand the new leadership model. At LiveWorld, we've developed a social media framework: Culture + Brand Participation + Marketing Integration, all supported by Trust—with the new model for leadership playing a role across all of these.

- **Culture:** Fostering an environment means defining the cultural model in which a group will exist, communicate, and interoperate. From the leader's perspective, defining the cultural tone



is the foundation of influence; for it is here that the values, aspirations, and emotional resonance of the group are set. What is the social currency of the group: sharing, storytelling, contributing expertise, or something else? What gives this group its sense of identity?

- **Brand participation:** Even though a brand or individual leader can't command the group, it's still critical to participate—to be part of it. First, one must be accepted to the group by doing a good job of setting the cultural model and then listening to the group. Look at participation not as a matter of talking to the group, but fostering dialogue and relationships among the group. Done well, the group will invite the leader to participate with them.

- **Marketing integration:** Help the team connect or integrate with other parts of the organization and the channels, groups, and venues it must work with.

- **Trust:** The horizontal, democratized nature of social media means the truth will always come out. A leader then

suggests, insists on, and practices transparency and authenticity. Success and mistakes are acknowledged. Groups are empowered and more effective when they embrace reality and can trust each other to work together.

When things go well a leader follows these approaches to amplify the success and highlight the group members who are good role models for the culture. Instead of being vertical leaders based on organizational authority, these people emerge as horizontal leaders and positive advocates based on supporting the cultural values leadership has set.

When things go wrong, as in a social media crisis, stick to these concepts. Too often when leaders (brands or individuals)—even if well practiced in social media—face a crisis, they revert to control models. For example, a brand that tries to delete critical comments on its Facebook Page. Or a leader who tries to quiet group members who object to a program. It simply doesn't work. Like a game of whack-a-mole, the more you try to control or delete your detractors, the more they pop up elsewhere. The social network world has endless venues for detractors to pop up, fueled in anger by your attempts to squelch them.

**How does a leader handle such problems?** Before a crisis, foster a culture that builds advocates for you while still allowing criticism. It's hard to build the relationships amid crisis. Brand advocates need to be in place ahead of time. When the voice of critics rises, don't try to shut it down; instead foster dialogue and relationships. Provide guidance, not control. This will diffuse issues while enabling advocates to defend the brand or leader. This is leadership through horizontal communications, relationship-building, and context-setting rather than vertical control. Group members value the transparency and authenticity. Handling a crisis this way builds loyalty, support, trust and moves toward goals.

**Leadership revisited (and reversed).** Dale Carnegie's recipe of leadership begins with *How to win friends and influence people*. A traditional leadership model would follow with *how to build a hierarchical organization (friends) and thereby influence them*. In the new socially networked world of friends, likes, and leveled playing fields of voice, leadership reverses. By learning to first influence people with social media, you can win more friends—and then empower them to meet their goals, together. LE

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**ACTION:** Evolve to a new model of leadership.