

The Five Leadership Positions

by Brian Betkowski

Revisiting an article on leadership from our very first Jabian Journal with lessons that still ring true today.

What do we mean when we say “leadership position”? Some people mean a title, such as CEO. Others use the term to indicate a person who has a large following—a leader such as Gandhi, for example. To politicians, a leadership position is counted in number of votes. If you’re an athlete or a racer, it may mean having the greatest distance between yourself and your nearest competitor. It can mean different things depending on how it’s used and by whom.

What if we considered the phrase “leadership position” literally? As in the physical and mental position that you take compared to those you are leading? That’s one way to put leadership—as a business and life skill—into tangible terms.

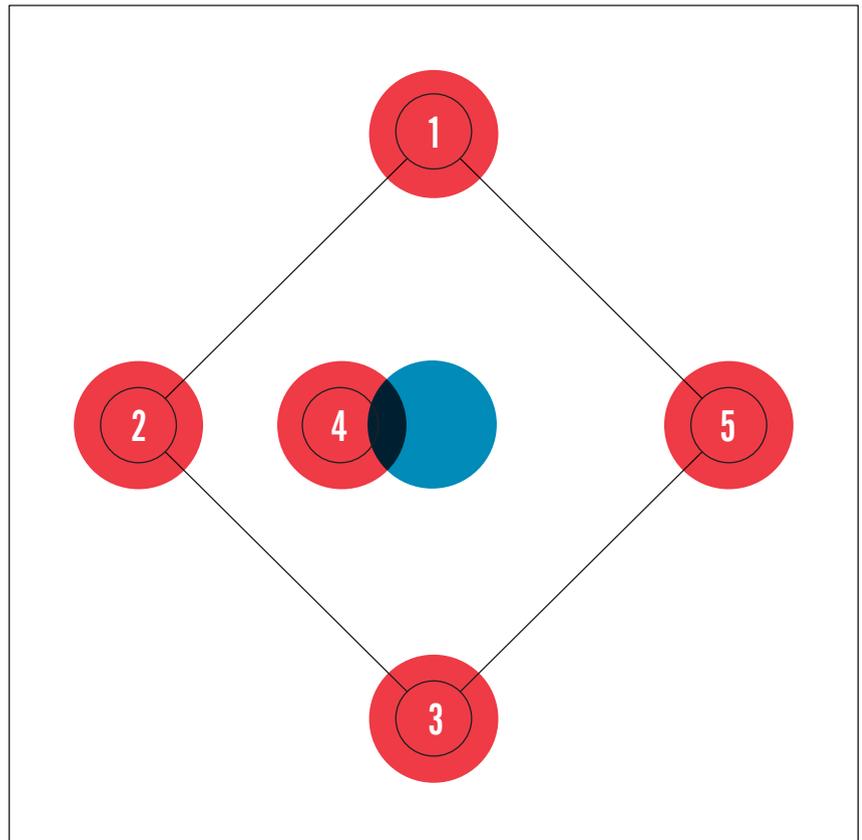
Five Leadership Positions

Consider five positions from which you might lead (Figure 1). These five leadership positions have distinct characteristics and are often combined to achieve certain goals and fit the personalities of the leaders and those they lead. Let's examine each of them in detail.

1. Leading from Above

This is the leadership position most often associated with people of power. Leaders who take this position make decisions, set direction, and control outcomes. This position can sometimes feel hierarchical or dictatorial if taken to the extreme. Often, strong leaders in this position hide weakness at all costs to maintain their aura of strength and control. In some situations (dictatorial regimes, for example), people follow these leaders because they have to, not because they want to. This leadership position is well suited to short-term success and is often associated with takeovers, turnarounds, the military, or politics. However, there are exceptional leaders in this position who have achieved greatness for prolonged periods.

Some of our greatest presidents have taken this leadership position. President Franklin D. Roosevelt did it during his leadership of America out of the Great Depression. He set direction, refused to take no for an answer, and would not accept defeat in the wake of an economic and societal disaster. His hard-charging demeanor and results-oriented leadership style were at least partially responsible for his being the only president in our



history to be elected to serve more than two terms. He also masterfully hid his tough battle with polio—which left him wheelchair bound much of the time—from the public.

2. Leading from Behind

This is the position of a typical manager. It is a push, not pull, leadership position. The motto of a manager in this position might be, “Do as I say, not as I do.” It is a tactical, not strategic, position and is often focused on results at the expense of other things. The bonds between the manager and those being managed may be weak. On the leadership scale, this type of manager barely registers.

3. Leading from Below

This leadership position is typically referred to as “servant leadership.” Leaders in this position always put others over themselves, which builds great respect among their followers. It can be a thankless position in some cultures and can sometimes take long periods of time to take hold. Often the greatness of these leaders is not properly recognized until after their time as active leaders has passed, with the benefit of historical perspective. These leaders usually display extreme passion for their causes and lead with inspiration and dedication. These traits can sometimes make up for personal or group shortcomings, since their followers may be more inspired by their passion than their execution. It is common that leaders

in this position do not necessarily have official power to lead, but are still highly influential through their passion and dedication. This position can be extremely rewarding, and can be a great long-term leadership position for the right person.

A great example of a servant leader is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the American clergyman, activist, and leader of the civil rights movement. Dr. King put others above himself his entire life, and paid the ultimate sacrifice when he was assassinated for his beliefs. He was a brilliant orator and passionate visionary who inspired people of all races to band together for a just cause. His influence was far reaching during his lifetime, and his message continues to influence the world today.

4. Leading from Beside

In the sixth century B.C., the great philosopher Lao Tzu said, “To lead people, walk beside them.” As time went on, leaders who lead from beside came to be known more often as “team players.” Their leadership identity, however, is often masked by their “one for all, all for one” and “get it done” peer mentality. These leaders are able to balance their focus on results with professionalism and respect for their teams and everyone they interact with. They are humble and very rarely like to be singled out, even though the great ones are usually especially gifted in their fields.

The world of professional sports gives us some timeless examples of this kind of leader in team players such as Wayne Gretzky and Jackie Robinson. The mentality translates well from sports to business, too. The late Peter Drucker, one of the

great influencers of modern business, said, “The leaders who work most effectively, it seems to me, never say ‘I.’ And that’s not because they have trained themselves not to say ‘I.’ They don’t think ‘I.’ They think ‘we’; they think ‘team.’ They understand their job to be to make the team function. They accept responsibility and don’t sidestep it, but ‘we’ gets the credit... This is what creates trust, what enables you to get the task done.” It is this attitude that allows these leaders to influence others without necessarily having formal authority or power over them.

5. Leading from in Front

Leading from in front is leading by example. These leaders expect nothing from others that they would not expect from themselves. They display courage and prefer to pull others along rather than push them. Author Harold R. McAlindon said, “Do not follow where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.”

One of the most significant differentiating factors (and often a barrier to this leadership position) is the time and dedication it takes to lead from this position and “create the trail.” These individuals have long-term success as leaders through good and bad times due to their “it’s a marathon, not a sprint” mentality. They can inspire people to go to great lengths for their success as well as for the success of their followers.

This position is the pinnacle of leadership achievement, since it is the most efficient and effective leadership for long-term results. Of course, it is not a one-size-fits-all style—not all situations call for the investment required to obtain long-term success.

(Taken to the extreme or applied when not entirely necessary, an overabundance of passion might cause this leadership position be confused with martyrdom.) These leaders give 100 percent and expect that back from their followers. They push their teams to achieve the greatness that they are capable of, and they do not accept defeat.

For examples of this type of leader, look to history. Take President George Washington, for instance. Although Washington displayed mastery of multiple leadership positions, the imagery of General Washington leading his troops into battle with his sword drawn against all odds and at all costs is the kind of leadership that gives you goose bumps. Remember the scenes from *Braveheart*, when Mel Gibson as Sir William Wallace charged into battle after battle during the Wars of Scottish Independence? That’s this kind of leadership.

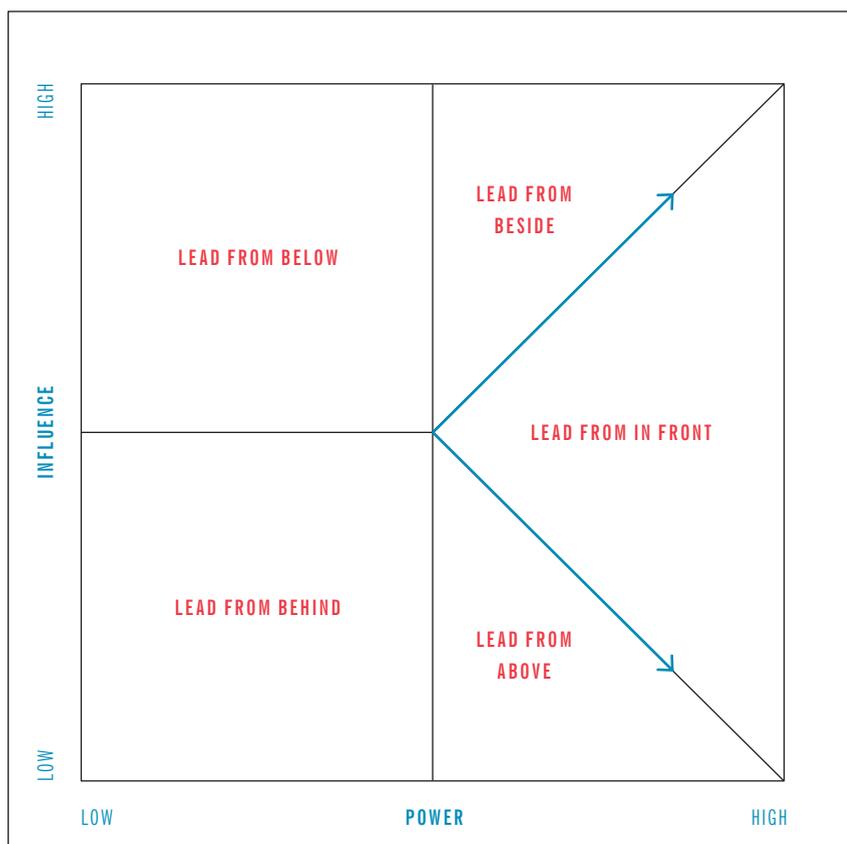
As with other leadership types, the skills and traits of this leadership position are applicable to other facets of life, including our personal lives. For example, a father can raise his child by leading from in front—as a role model who leads by example.

Does Position Matter?

Yes, leadership position matters a lot, for three important reasons:

1. Your position determines your outcome.
2. Your position determines your satisfaction.
3. Your position is not always determined by you.

Figure 2: Power vs. Influence



Great leaders consciously choose and then master their leadership position(s). They align this choice to the outcomes they want and to their natural style. Leaders in their natural position will be most influential and enjoy themselves the most.

But sometimes a leader must choose the leadership position that fits the situation—even if it’s not the position they might naturally have chosen. The best leaders adapt to their followers and lead in a way that those people are most apt to follow. The acknowledgment that your position is not always in your control can be stressful, but the best leaders dedicate themselves to a journey of learning to become great leaders. It is important to remember that great leaders can adopt portions of more than one position to fit their situation and style, but mastery of any one leadership position takes years of practice. One must nurture skills and excel in at least one position first, since the “jack of all trades, master of none” concept has not proven to be effective for great leaders.

Developing leaders must learn and practice many aspects of leadership, including hard skills, soft skills, relationship skills, leadership skills, emotional skills, confidence, courage, drive, etc. The good news is that these skills can be acquired and improved over time. The best leaders have proven to be lifelong learners, and dedicate time to making themselves and those around them better people. There are many great works that document outstanding leadership qualities in detail—extolling characteristics and behaviors such as listening, empathy, consistency, hard work, results-oriented focus, etc.

Those tools help bring attention to the skills needed for leadership success and the choice of leadership position.

To determine the leadership position that is right for you, you must also consider two dimensions of leadership: power and influence.

Power Versus Influence

Author Kenneth Blanchard said, “The key to successful leadership today is influence, not authority.” Great leaders are conscious of the difference between the two and choose their leadership positions accordingly. They know that long-term success as leaders requires influence, and that the right amount of power used in the correct ways can be an important catalyst to drive results. Richard McKeown

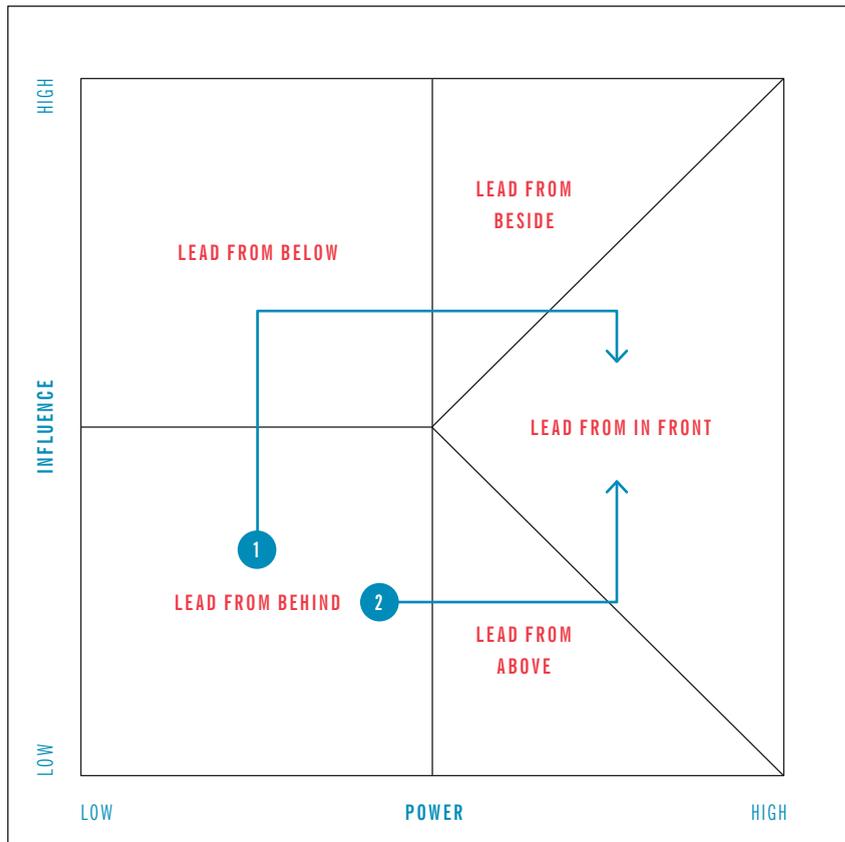
(www.richardmckeown.com) elegantly summarizes the differences between power and influence:

- Power is positional. Influence is personal.
- Power is wielded. Influence is granted.
- Power pushes. Influence persuades.
- Power is resented. Influence is respected.
- Power expires. Influence endures.

Figure 2 depicts the basic relationship between the five leadership positions as they relate to power and influence.

The most important insight from this figure is that power and influence are often correlated for leaders who

Figure 3: The Position Journey



lead from in front and beside, but inversely correlated for those who lead from above. As influence increases for leaders who lead from beside and in front, so does power, and vice versa. (See top arrow, Figure 2.) This compounding effect enables them to be much more effective leaders as they become stronger.

The opposite is often observed for leaders who lead from above. As their power increases, their influence decreases, and vice versa. (See bottom arrow, Figure 2.) Boris Yeltsin, the first president of post-Soviet Russia, said it well: “You can build a throne with bayonets, but you can’t sit on it for long.” These leaders constantly scramble for new tactics to maintain power in the face of dissent.

There are, of course, exceptions to this rule when physical or military force is applied. But in general, and even for some military regimes, only those who can increase their influence by choosing the proper leadership position can enjoy long runs of power. This has been evident in recent years in the uprisings in the Middle East, which have led to the ousting of multiple powerful leaders who were leading from above with force and did not have true influence over the majority of their countrymen. The acknowledgment of this correlation is what often drives great leaders on their journey through these positions as they mature in their lives and in their careers.

The Position Journey

Finding the right leadership position is a personal experience. It’s different for every individual and depends on many factors. Let’s assume for now that the predominant mainstream desire for great leaders is to lead from in front so that they can achieve long-term, sustainable leadership success and reap the correlated compounding effect of power and influence. The different paths that leaders can take on their journey affect their balance of power and influence, and therefore require the development of different skills. Let’s explore a real-life journey through these positions.

In this example (Figure 3), Jill is in a typical manager position, leading from behind. There are two primary journeys Jill can take to improve her leadership position.

The first journey (arrow No. 1, Figure 3) is a grassroots journey that involves hard work and passion for her leadership position. When making the first move from manager to servant leader (leading from below), Jill must establish trust with those she is leading by taking a true interest in making them better people (i.e., raising their skills) and conveying true passion for her beliefs. Once that is established, Jill may be accepted as part of the team and can become a team player, leading as a peer from beside. At this stage, Jill must heavily focus on developing her own skills as well as supporting her team. Once that position is established and her skills are adequate, Jill can lead predominantly from in front by setting an example and continuing to inspire her team and herself to greatness.

The time spent at each phase depends on the situation. No matter how long it takes, the journey will pay long-term dividends for Jill because the relationships that are established throughout the journey will be long-standing and strong. Additionally, along Jill's journey she could display glimpses of characteristics of any of the leadership positions, even if it is not her dominant position at the time. For example, there may be circumstances where she can lead from in front even if she is a peer. These opportunities to practice are what develop her into a great leader in the future.

The second journey (*arrow No. 2, Figure 3*) is typical for someone who earns (or is given) a position that vests in them a level of authority and power that enables them to lead from above. Instead of the grassroots journey previously described, let's assume that Jill has impressed her boss and is quickly promoted from a manager into an executive leadership position with ultimate P&L and resource authority for an entire business unit. This transition is very challenging, and many leaders in the corporate world find themselves in such a situation, ill prepared and untrained.

Although somewhat daunting, Jill's situation offers opportunities to raise her skills and leverage her position to ultimately lead from in front if she chooses. There are, however, many distractions and barriers that she must overcome in order to gain the ability to influence those she leads. Just to name a few:

- Internal politics and culture
- Resentment from others who did not get her position
- Weak relationships with her peers and subordinates
- Her compensation structure, incentives, and bonuses
- Her ability to get promoted
- Her boss
- Her shareholders
- Her ability to delegate and trust her teams

It is best for Jill to focus also on raising the skills of those she is leading, to continue to strengthen the leadership bond in parallel to raising her own skill level. This will also enable her to hold the leadership position longer, if she chooses, while increasing her level of influence.

Journeys No. 1 and No. 2 are very different, but if properly executed, both can end up at the same position with equally good results. It is important to ask yourself which journey you are on and which journey you want to be on. Also, ask yourself how others perceive the leadership position(s) that you demonstrate. Is that perception what you would like it to be?

In Summary

Finding the right leadership position is a personal journey. There are many permutations of these positions and ways to get to each. There can also be more than one suitable position for the situation at hand.

It is important to be always conscious of your leadership position

and to focus on raising the capabilities of yourself as a leader, as well as the capabilities of those you lead. This will enable you to obtain and maintain the leadership position that is right for you while balancing your power and influence. In practice, over time, people will adopt multiple positions of leadership at different times and create their unique blended style that works for them. This constant evolution and adaptation are what create each generation of great leaders. ●

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