tom brown

inside

leadership

A Manager?
A Leader?

The differences are many.
And they matter.

For over 25 years I have been asking managers — from California to Maine, from Christchurch, New Zealand, to Frankfurt, Germany — to identify the traits that make one manager different from another manager in a leadership sense.

In short, what are the signal differences between *a manager* and *a leader?*

It's not a new question, to be sure. But what these managers have been telling me is illuminating:

A **manager** is all wrapped up in "planning, organizing, and delegating." He seems to relish the integration of hundreds of details into a smooth-clicking, efficient harmony. A **leader** is more inclined to pay attention to "the overall direction" of an enterprise — giving the workplace canvas a very broad brush about "what we are, where we are going" — and then to rely on trusted subordinates to sketch in the details and keep the leader posted on progress.

A **manager** is in the business of "clarifying" goals and tasks. Much as the freshman composition student wrangles with the third level of an outline for a thesis, managers labor hard to determine "who is going to do what." **Leaders,** I'm told, believe that their time should be spent shaking up the status quo (in a healthy sense) and compelling people to take sound risks to make the organization razor-sharp in both an operational sense and a competitive sense.

A **manager** likes to solve problems. Much as police respond to crimes, or firefighters battle infernos, managers have a penchant for finding problems that need solving. **Leaders,** on the other hand, think of the critical messages that need to be communicated throughout the company. They ask: "What symbol, what message, can I emphasize today that will get everyone focused on why we are here and what we are trying to become?"

Managers control; **leaders** inspire.

Many men and women have told me that the title **"manager"** connotes that "someone is in charge" — the same feeling that glows in the hospital room when the surgeon arrives and starts giving commands prior to an operation. A person called **"a leader"** finds that the title also connotes "someone in charge" but in a *hands-off* way. The leader cultivates the desire in others to accept responsibility for tasks, deadlines, and milestones.

Managers have a reputation as people who list "things to be done" on one side of a page and "available people" on the other — and then draw lines connecting tasks to people. **Leaders** would rather build teams, much as a coach does. The leader may assign people to positions on the team, but his challenge is to build an environment of collaboration and synergy that spurs people toward "a greater horizon."

The **manager** administers systems to implement the corporate vision into reality. **Leaders,** by contrast, are seen as disrupting current systems as they challenge the workplace to be better.

Managers wear invisible badges that confer upon them the power of management. Strangely, they seem almost naked without the organizational blessing of a managerial title — the "supervisor box" on the organizational chart. Without the authority that comes with a title, a manager seems as powerless as the frontier marshal who turns in his badge. **Leaders** work from an elected base. They may or may not have an illustrious title, but their authority is unquestionable because it is based on the deference accorded them by those whom they lead. Many people have told me that leaders would truly prefer to influence rather than command — and thus leaders can exist at any, and every, level.

If there is one dominant theme that echoes in my mind, still, after all the discussions I've had, it is that managers are easy to spot in any enterprise because they have the job of "putting out fires." The **manager** is the person who is repeatedly called upon to crack through the bureaucracy (that he or she may have helped to construct) and to "make progress" whenever gridlock is choking the system. In contrast, **leaders** are in the vision business: they are trying to unify the organization around a clear sense of becoming, of getting as many wagons as possible headed toward the destination "just over those rugged hills."

Curiously, in my quest to find out what makes leaders different or special, I have not detected any disrespect for the institution of management. *Everyone I've talked with says we need both leaders and managers.* The encomiums go something like this:

Managers make tomorrows. They crystallize the expectations of people into concrete agendas and action plans. In this sense, they truly master change.

But **leaders** have an even higher calling. They rally people to the organizational vision, while also urging them to lock in place the values that keep that vision distinct — and alive. Leaders know that repeated success, for any kind of business, is always an IF.

If all of us are to make some sense of today's whirling state of management thinking throughout industry and business, perhaps we should make sure that we emphasize *exactly* the right points in the "we need more leadership" speech.

It is not that our profession needs fewer managers and more leaders. It's that all of us could dramatically bolster the destiny of our enterprises by committing to whatever it takes to become that rare being — ***the managerial leader.***

Tom Brown is a champion of vanguard thinking about leadership. The author of hundreds of articles, he also wrote the first online book on leadership: *The Anatomy Of Fire: Sparking A New Spirit Of Enterprise,* which explores the look and feel of leadership in the 21st Century. To learn more about Tom, including his major role in *Business: The Ultimate Resource*, the largest handbook/database ever on managerial leadership, go to www.tombrown.us.