

TRICKY PUZZLE NO. 8

“Control: Needed or Not”

1. Managers have the skills to control things.
2. Leaders have the judgement not to control things.
3. Which way for Manager-Leaders ?



Managers use skills and strategies to control stuff. They are a lot like Maxwell Smart – perpetually wresting Control from Chaos. Fortunately, their tools and methods are more sophisticated than his, and they do not talk regularly into their shoes.

Our complex society works only in so much as complex systems and organisations are well managed and do not get out of control. Maybe in an unhappy future, algorithms will control everything including us, but for now it takes well trained and experienced human managers to maintain balance. It is alarming that some human and natural systems are currently spinning out of control, but when infrastructure systems work, health systems work, financial systems and all the others work, they are being managed and controlled. Committed and skilled workforces and their organisations still need to be well managed. Controlling managers are not always loved, and many professionals and workers dream of flourishing without them, but the good ones provide a benefit all round.

Managers do not just control, however, they also need to lead. A controlling leader is basically an oxymoron. Leadership regularly involves letting go of the urge to control and direct. It is tricky, and takes learning and practice, for skillful managers to exercise leadership well. Leadership is needed for all those challenges and opportunities which cannot simply be controlled and resolved by asserting authority and using some reliable technique. With management “too many cooks spoil the broth”, but with leadership it is often “the more the merrier”. Those grumbling staff have a very good case for complaint if managers treat them as moveable widgets and don’t lead them and their teams to bring the best out of both.

It is not that leadership is superior to management – in contemporary organizations they usually involve the same person. But simply managing and controlling is not enough to help an organization or business to adapt, self-organize, or innovate in order to stay relevant and to succeed in a period of great opportunity and uncertainty. A common trap for managers is to become too preoccupied or comfortable controlling, they ignore the work of leadership and their organizations remain underperforming and their people unfulfilled as a result. Even senior leaders who understand intellectually the need for such balance, can struggle to let go and put it into practice.

You can find more clues at our Blog, explore our treasure trove of Articles, Podcasts and Workshops, or examine our popular leadership intensive “The LOT” at www.searleburke.com .