

The Take Charge Approach to Leadership

Edward J. Tomey, Professor Emeritus

Antioch University New England Department of Organization & Management

Note: This article is based on Ed Tomey's book manuscript currently in process, entitled *First, Take Charge of Yourself: An Approach to Effective Leadership*.

Managers and leaders at all levels in organizations struggle with getting things done through others. They will often ask such questions as: "What can I do when someone who's otherwise a strong performer has not followed through on a delegated task?" "What do I say to a team member whose negativity seems to be dragging everyone else down?" "How can I get a staff member who has excellent ideas to speak up when we're trying to solve problems?" "What's the best way to approach a middle manager who really knows the technical end of the business but who just makes life difficult for those above and below?"

Here's how one frustrated leader put it:

"What I want from others is performance. I just want them to do their jobs! In the end, I look to them to carry out their roles and responsibilities and not to leave it to me to complete tasks left unfinished or to mend tattered relationships. And, on a given workday, I want to be able to tackle the tasks that I set out for myself and not to have to set them all aside while I clean up other people's messes!"

In most cases, the answer - despite the temptation - is not a version of "You're fired!" That's always an option. But more constructive answers typically lie within the leaders themselves.

Leader, Take Charge of Thyself

If leaders want others to be different, then leaders must first do something different. They need to give others who are not performing to standards something different to respond to.

This, then, requires leaders to take charge of themselves so that they capture the attention of those they lead and influence them to step up to their responsibilities. Leaders need to have an ability to see the big picture and the little one, know their needs and wants, believe that they have the right to ask people to do their jobs, and feel centered about holding others accountable for carrying out the tasks they were hired to perform.

In nearly 35 years of consulting to organizations and coaching their leaders, I've concluded that the most successful people in charge are those who:

- Are clear about what results they want from each interaction.
- Act and communicate in ways that are most likely to produce the desired outcomes.
- Avoid the “traps” leaders often set for themselves that prevent them from managing themselves and others effectively.
- Help others to behave similarly by training them to become problem solvers.

In other words, leaders in charge of themselves are thoughtful about the outcomes they seek. They have a vision of what success looks like for a problem that needs solving or for an interaction they need to have with a direct report. They very self-consciously make a plan for how they will influence a situation to bring the clear idea of what they want to fruition. They see themselves as instruments of change and finely tune themselves to communicate and behave in ways that will help them reach their goals.

This approach demands awareness of one's own abilities, commitment to self-improvement, willingness to risk, readiness to change, and belief in the principle that people want to be successful in their work and, therefore, through positive leadership influence, can improve their performance.

Start with a Vision of the Outcome You Seek

As is the case with strategic planning, career development, or even planting a garden, if you start with a vision - one that captures the outcome you seek and is influenced by the values that you hold - there's a greater chance you'll develop a successful strategy for achieving it. In working with the Take Charge concept, a vision can apply to a specific work problem you want to solve; to the kind of professional relationship you want to build with someone; to how you'd like someone else to behave; or, to how you, in your leadership role, want to behave in a given situation.

To get started, I recommend the [Take Charge Worksheet \(PDF 19K\)](#), a two-phase process that begins with asking yourself a series of questions. Your responses to these questions will lead you to a clear, succinct statement of what you want to see happen, or what you want someone else to do, or what change you want to influence, or how you want to carry out your role as a leader. This first phase is called “Thinking It Through” and is followed by a suggested format - called a “DESC Script” - to help you capture the words you want to use and are most likely to influence others to help you to bring your vision to reality.

Say What's Already on Your Mind

Being a Take Charge leader requires an unusual amount of forthrightness in both thought and expression (although it need not be unsupportive or unfriendly).

Self-expression is the friend of the Take Charge leader. Once you have the vision of what you want to see happen, it's so much easier to find the words that will make the difference. Leaders I've worked with typically know what needs to be said, but don't realize it. For example, a leader might be thinking something like:

"It's not such a big deal. All I want is for Jim to show me that he takes this assignment seriously and to map out the steps he's going to follow to get it done and then just do it! If he runs into a glitch, I want him either to figure it out or let me know he's stuck. That will at least give me the chance to help him think it through and get unstuck. But instead he just goes into hiding, and I don't hear from him until it's almost too late."

With just a little bit of coaching and editing, this leader knows what she wants to say to Jim, and it won't be very different from what's already on her mind. Here's one possibility:

"Jim, what I want from you is not beyond your reach. We've already agreed on what the goal of this task is. What I'd like you to do is to take the next few hours and lay out the steps that you and members of your team will take to get there. Let me take a look at your plan before you start. I may or may not have any suggestions, and I will turn it around immediately. Then I want you to move ahead with whatever we agreed on. If you run into any problems, see if you can figure it out on your own or with the assistance of your colleagues. If you run into a stone wall, I want you to get back to me right away and give me the chance to consult with you on it. In any case, I want you to stick to the milestones we agree on for each task so that we're not late with it. Is this something I can count on you to do?"

In this example, the leader needs to ensure getting agreement and commitment and have some way of tracking the results. Once your confidence in a person begins to build, you can reduce the number of "check back with me" statements, but don't let go of the problem sooner than you should.

In all cases, you need to make sure you communicate in ways that are clear and convincing. This doesn't mean you need to be gruff and dictatorial. You can even be friendly and warm as long as you avoid obscuring your message. But it's important that you communicate and behave in ways that convince people to take you seriously.

Provide "Balanced Feedback"

People who report to an effective Take Charge leader know they'll be held accountable to deliver what's been implicitly or explicitly promised. They also know that the Take Charge leader will give them feedback regularly from a "balanced perspective." That is, when they perform well, they'll receive positive, appreciative, detailed feedback about what particularly went well and the impact of their actions on others or on the task that was achieved.

Likewise, when things don't go well, they know the Take Charge leader will tell them about what it was that didn't work and what corrective actions are expected.

Balanced feedback ensures that communications channels are open and lets people know that they'll hear from their leader on a regular basis. They will always know where they stand and will likely work to meet commitments so they can get more of the "good stuff" that all people like to hear.

Sounds challenging? Well, in a way it is because it asks you to give up some behaviors that you've adopted about managing others. Some of those things you may have to work on include:

- **Need to be liked** - being direct with others and holding them accountable to their commitments are leadership behaviors that carry with them the possibility that people won't like you as much as when you let some things slide or when you picked up the unfinished pieces.
- **Poor confronting skills** - holding others accountable in a firm but civil way is difficult for many leaders. It's easier somehow to do it yourself than it is to give it back and train them to do it right.
- **Fear of conflict** - Insisting that people be responsible in a firm, direct way carries with it the possibility of conflict, and that always upsets you. Many people, in leadership roles would rather do - whatever - than to get into an argument with difficult people.
- **Absence of a vision** - being clear about what you want from someone else whose job it is to meet that need takes forethought, clarity, and time. Shooting from the hip works every once in a while, and that's always a choice you can make, but you also must recognize that you're leaving the outcome up to the fates and not up to your leadership.

Watch Out for Leadership Traps!

It's one thing to take charge of yourself...and it's another to *stay* in charge. The best intentions of Take Charge leaders can be defeated by the leaders themselves.

Numerous traps await you. Over the years, I've identified at least 20 traps that leaders can catch themselves in and not know it until they're already ensnared in them.

Four of them deserve mention in this article because of the frequency with which leaders walk into them.

Doing Trap - Ever since you've been promoted to a managerial role, you somehow have been unable to let go of the tasks you used to do. Even when you delegate some of those tasks to others, you have a tendency to micromanage. At the first sign of a problem, you either take the task back to solve it yourself, or you allow your direct reports to somehow drop it back on your desk. (It's hard to find the time you need to run your team, unit, or organization when you're still doing the work you should be training others to do.)

It's-Not-Bad-Enough-Yet Trap - One of your direct reports isn't producing at the level or the quality you expect. You hesitate to intervene, thinking that she will see the problem and self-correct it. But it continues. Still you wait. Not yet bad enough to require your direct attention. Then, - you guessed it - it gets even worse. You're wondering if you should make your move. You can't quite decide if it's bad enough. Finally, it happens again and you declare - explosively - "That's it! I've had it! I've given you every chance. No more breaks!" Your direct report is surprised at your reaction. You've never said anything before now. (This kind of temper tantrum is not reflective of a leader who has worked hard to get it together. It pays to deal directly with a problem when you first see it.)

It's-Too-Late Trap - You made a decision yesterday, perhaps too hastily. Your people have gone into action based on that decision. You realize your error, but you hesitate changing your mind. Good leaders don't do that, you think. How would it look of you changed your mind now? Maybe after everyone has finished the task, you can spend some time redoing it so that it fits what you should have done in the first place. Perhaps you'll hide it from your staff so they won't feel bad. (It's seldom too late to change your mind in the face of clearer thinking or new evidence. It takes courage to admit a mistake, but it's also a mark of an authentic leader trying to do the best thing.)

Hoping & Hinting Trap - This a close relative of the "It's Not Bad Enough" trap. The leader again knows something is not right but wants to wait just a little longer to see if the problem won't straighten itself out (leading by hoping). Or, the leader tries to improve the situation with an indirect suggestion or inquiry, such as "I was wondering how that report is coming?" or, "Have you had a chance to contact that new marketing firm yet?" (leading by hinting). (Neither of these wimpish behaviors will likely help an errant direct report finally to see the light and start doing what he or she gets paid to do. Nor will they help a work team whose members display insufficient commitment to a common purpose.)

Visit the [10 Leadership Traps \(PDF 32K\)](#) for advice on avoiding and escaping these and other traps.

No leader can always avoid the traps, but the Take Charge leader doesn't give up and seldom believes it is too late. I'm reminded of premier consultant Peter Block's notion that the world is not populated by minefields, but rather by fields of rakes lying hidden in the grass. It's nearly impossible for the leader to avoid stepping on all the rakes. It's going to happen. The trick, Peter suggests, is to get better at catching the rake handle before it smacks you in the forehead!

Conclusion

The Take Charge concept may well be the solution to getting others to perform at peak levels. It may also help to erase the feeling leaders often have of being "stuck," and it may enable them to dump any self-accusations that they have behaved ineffectively as leaders.

To summarize:

- Make the decision that you must take charge of yourself if you want to be a significant influence on your job, your area of responsibility, and the dynamics that dominate communications between you and your direct reports.
- Have a vision of the desired outcomes of the task you want to achieve, the kind of relationships you want to have, and the way you want to behave as a leader.
- Develop a strategy to achieve your vision and communicate your ideas clearly, concisely, and effectively. Represent yourself in a ways that ensure people will take you seriously and be responsive.
- Avoid common traps that take you off the track. Be ready to assertively scramble out of them quickly should you find yourself caught in one of them.

Becoming a "Take Charge" leader increases the chances of your success but doesn't guarantee it. Your leadership development task is to get increasingly better at your job so that the chances of success continue to go up.

The only sure way to make this happen is to emulate the response given by the hipster in the 1950s joke when a visitor to New York City stopped him on the street to ask, "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?" The answer? "Practice, man, practice."