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### Leadership Is More than Interpersonal Skills

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Most of the 89,000 leadership books offered on Amazon.com focus on traditional interpersonal leadership: the relationships between leaders and followers. Interpersonal leadership sets up an expectation that leaders must be in dialog or at least in view of their followers. Yet this style of interaction is less likely as work stretches across locations and company boundaries as we telecommute, crowdsource, and take on joint ventures. Modern leadership may be as much about facilitating strategy through hiring, training, technology, and focused tasks and goals, as it is about face-to-face interaction.

Clear and meaningful tasks, goals, and technology tools that support the organization's direction can supplement interpersonal leadership. This is a classic topic in the management field. In the 70s, Steve Kerr and John Jermier offered that leaders do many things beyond their interpersonal relationships with their followers. Talking about the history of substitutes for leadership research, Jermier said in 1997, "[Substitutes for leadership] pointed to unobtrusive and impersonal forces such as technology and task characteristics, professional standards, and formal regulations (policies, rules and procedures)." One of their conclusions was that some people don't even need leadership in the traditional sense, or find leadership substitutes through interactions with other workers. Hiring for employees who can model the vision of the organization through their work can substitute for interactions with formal leaders.

Today, with work becoming more virtual and global, substitutes for interpersonal leadership can be powerful tools. Out of sight is sometimes out of mind, but great leaders are up to the task. Keith Murnighan's recent book, *Do Nothing: How to Stop Overmanaging and Become a Great Leader* ([http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1591845300/ref=as\\_li\\_ss\\_tl](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1591845300/ref=as_li_ss_tl)) illustrates leaders letting go to do more. Murnighan writes, "This is what great leaders do. They don't work; they facilitate and orchestrate."

Training, as well as hiring, can transmit leadership vision. In 2011, I talked with Doyle Hopper, general manager of Nucor's Vulcraft Group and Nucor Cold Finish. Nucor is the largest U.S. steelmaker and the largest recycler in North America (<http://www.nucor.com/story/chapter1/>). I've been a fan of Nucor's team-focused management style for years and was looking for an example of extreme leadership inside this unique organization. While they have had iconic leaders, especially the founder, Ken Iverson, they've built a company on culture and skills, not interpersonal leadership. Nucor has only five layers of management for over 22,000 employees.

Doyle told me how the Vulcraft site had responded to horrible flooding that took out a critical bridge and put two feet of water into their highly electrified plant. From sandbagging to dealing with dangerous electrical systems and arranging for cross-state transport of construction equipment, individuals from across the plant took charge.

"Nobody told them to do it. True Nucor people — culture just reacted to situation. I was blown away, but I shouldn't have been." "Who better to do the job than the people who own it? They're in this together. I don't want somebody else [e.g., contractors] in there fighting the battle. We know the result we're looking for, and we're prepared."

They were prepared because they hire, train, and reward for their goals (<http://www.nucor.com/story/chapter4/>) — not because of the interpersonal skills of their formal leaders.

Research on the efficacy of substitutes for leadership is mixed; technology may be the reason. From the 70s to the 90s when most of this research was done, we tended to be co-located with our leaders and we had smaller portions of our work online. Interpersonal leadership was easier and the technology tools to support alternatives were harder to come by. The need and power of substitutes may have been lost in that environment. The environment is very different now and so the benefits may be more apparent. My colleagues and I are digging into the growing role that technology plays in providing transparency and direction as substitutes for interpersonal leadership.

For example, it seems that organizational transparency broadens leadership substitute opportunities. Today, given access to data through normal work technologies, I expect it is easier to attain a high level of transparency. In their article (<http://hbr.org/2009/06/a-culture-of-candor/ar/1>) (and book (<http://www.amazon.com/Transparency-Leaders-Create-Culture-Candor/dp/0470278765>)) on the power of transparency, James O'Toole, Daniel Goleman, and Warren Bennis quote a CFO from SRC Holdings, a diversified remanufacturing company, regarding the company's 20-year program of sharing corporate financial and managerial data. The CFO said the net effect "is like having 700 internal auditors out there in every function of the company."

Sharing like this would have been a challenge when SRC Holdings first started. Technology can pass along perspectives normally only visible to highly placed leaders. New eyes and new perspectives can give workers the ability to lead themselves.

Don't stop working to be a great interpersonal leader. Do lead with all your resources. Consider how you can leverage your leadership efforts through better tasks, goals, hiring, training, and technology. Offer your own substitutes (<http://www.mixprize.org/m-prize/leaders-everywhere-challenge>) for interpersonal leadership in our modern, global, world.