

## Learning When to Lead and When to Follow

**JR, how do I know when I should lead and when I should follow? What is the true art of knowing how to contribute and when.** *Jeff Melchior*

Jeff, you have hit upon a great question! Learning how to answer your question takes practice, intuition, and no small degree of experience.

First, you must be able to answer a couple of questions. Are you currently in a situation where others acknowledge your role and authority for the situation in which you find yourself? Or, do you face a “leadership vacuum” because no one is currently performing that role? The answers to these questions can give you considerable insight into how to answer your question. Let’s take both in turn.

If you are currently in a position of authority and leadership, you need to be able to accurately assess what the team needs at that moment. If it is simply clear direction and guidance, you should assume the unambiguous role of leader to provide them with that. It may not be so simple however. A great leader also knows when to step back from the lead role in order to teach, coach, and mentor his team to success in ways that allow them to grow and develop, as well as allow them to make their own mistakes to gain hard won experience.

Leaders who are very confident and comfortable in their capabilities can oftentimes overlook the need to develop their people in the drive to “get things done”. This is precisely why answering your question is a very important skill to learn in your own development as a leader. This requires us to seriously evaluate our own strengths, weaknesses, and objectives, as well as that of our team members.

In the second scenario, where you do not have obvious authority and are not the formal leader, the dynamic is rather different. You not only have to recognize the need, but be willing to step up to the responsibilities. This can be complicated by several issues. Do you have the skills and training needed by this group to accomplish what they are trying to do? Is there more than one individual willing to step up to the plate? Is this situation a life-or-death crisis or is it a routine situation that just needs somebody to take charge and organize the efforts? Each of these will provide different answers to the question of “when do I lead and when do I follow.”

The good news is that in a situation with a leadership vacuum, you are most often able to answer these questions and analyze the situation very quickly. Logic and common sense will most often provide you with a reliable guide to know what you should do. The one situation you will have to quickly learn how to deal with is where two or more people begin to vie for the role of leader. Look within yourself to determine why you want to lead. Is it because you are the right person for the job and have unique capabilities; capabilities that are not present in the others; or is it more personal? If you are motivated by the desire for power, control, recognition, or dominance, those should be a red flag to you (and others) that you may not be the right person for that particular job. Power and control are tools to be used by great leaders as opposed to objectives to be desired. Examining your own motives will often tell you whether you should be leading or following.

Another aspect of this question is driven by a skill I believe to be in short supply in most leaders. I believe very strongly that in order to become a great leader, you must first learn to become a great follower! I don’t mean this in the sense of being a “blind follower” of someone. I mean it in the sense of being able to take direction, provide follow through, and to be accountable for delivering results. All of us follow someone at some point in

our lives. Whom do we follow and why do we follow them? If you evaluate the people in your life who have made a great difference and looked into why you were willing to follow them, it will give you great insight into how you can become a better leader!

One thing in particular I've learned in my lifetime, before I decide to follow someone who wants to change the world, I look very carefully to see how well they've done at changing themselves!

***J. R. McGee***

Managing Partner and CEO

1248 Queen Street, Pottstown PA 19464

[www.xstreamlean.com](http://www.xstreamlean.com)

610-212-6728

A Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business