Adair's Action-Centred Leadership

John Adair is a British leadership expert who taught at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in the 1960s and later became professor of leadership studies at the University of Surrey. His model, known as Action-Centred Leadership, appeared in his 1973 book of the same name. Adair argued that leadership is not mainly about personality, but about what a leader does. He drew three overlapping circles to show the three areas that every leader must care for: the task, the team and the individual. Because the circles overlap, a problem in one area quickly affects the other two.

1. Achieve the Task

The first circle is the task, the reason why the group exists. The leader makes sure that everyone understands the goal, the plan and the standards. Without progress on the task, a team soon feels frustrated and starts to break up. But a leader who looks only at the task and forgets the people may get results once and then lose the team.

Example: Friends who want to paint a community centre in one weekend need someone to achieve the task: a clear goal, a list of rooms and the right paint. With this focus on the task, the work is finished by Sunday evening.

At work: Murad, a project manager, leads a team that must open a new branch in six weeks. He achieves the task by turning the goal into a clear plan with weekly milestones. Everyone knows what must be ready and when.

2. Build the Team

The second circle is the team as a whole. A group needs shared rules, good communication and a spirit of working together. The leader builds the team by agreeing standards, solving conflicts early and celebrating shared success. A strong team can achieve more than its members could achieve alone.

Example: A choir sounds good only when the singers listen to each other, so the conductor builds the team with joint warm-ups and clear rules for rehearsals. Soon the voices blend into one sound.

At work: Two departments in Murad's project blame each other for delays. He builds the team with a short joint meeting every morning, where problems are shared without blame. The delays shrink, and the two groups start to help each other.

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3. Develop the Individual

The third circle is each individual in the team. Every person has their own needs, strengths and goals, and wants to be recognised. The leader gets to know people, gives them suitable responsibility and helps them to grow. When individuals feel valued, they give more to the team and to the task.

Example: A football coach notices that a quiet player reads the game very well, and develops the individual by making him the team's playmaker. The player gains confidence, and the whole team plays better.

At work: Murad notices that a young engineer seems bored with routine work. He develops the individual by giving her responsibility for the branch's new booking system. She works with new energy, and the system is ready a week early.

4. The Leadership Functions

Adair also described leadership functions that serve all three circles at once. The leader plans, initiates the work by briefing the team, and controls progress. The leader also supports people, informs them about what is happening, and evaluates the results. These functions are skills that can be learned, not talents that someone either has or lacks. A leader who performs them well keeps the task, the team and the individual in balance.

Example: A family preparing a wedding uses the leadership functions: one person plans the day, briefs the relatives, checks progress, supports anyone who is stressed and keeps everyone informed. Afterwards, the family evaluates what went well for the next celebration.

At work: After the branch opens, Murad uses the evaluating function with the team: what worked, what did not, and what to repeat. The lessons become a checklist for the next opening.

Conclusion

In summary, Action-Centred Leadership asks leaders to care for three overlapping areas: the task, the team and the individual. Neglecting any one circle weakens the other two. Adair's leadership functions of planning, initiating, controlling, supporting, informing and evaluating help leaders keep the circles in balance. Above all, the model reminds us that leadership is something we do, and something we can learn.

Sources

- Adair, J. (1973). Action-Centred Leadership. McGraw-Hill (the three circles: task, team, individual).
- Businessballs: Action-Centred Leadership - John Adair – https://www.businessballs.com/leadership-models/action-centred-leadership-john-adair/
- Note: the overlapping three-circle Action-Centred Leadership logo is a trademark of John Adair. This summary is independent and not endorsed by him.

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