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1

The Role of a Leader

Leadership means different things to different people. Whether you are leading a small project team, a sports team or a multi-national organization, the principles of leadership are the same. In this first chapter we explore what leadership is and how it can positively impact an organization's performance.

Introduction

Attend a training course or seminar on leadership, and it's quite likely that during one of the early sessions you'll be asked to take part in an exercise that involves listing a number of well-known, successful leaders. This exercise typically elicits responses such as Mahatma Gandhi; Franklin D Roosevelt; or even England's Queen Elizabeth I. From the business world, names typically cited include Steve Jobs (Apple CEO); Henry Ford (founder of the Ford motor Company) and Richard Branson (founder of the Virgin brand). All great leaders... there's no doubt.

Individuals are then typically asked to draw out similarities in leadership styles between each of their examples in the hope that these will provide clues to possible leadership characteristics and styles that might correlate to success.

It's a fun exercise. However, having experienced this exercise very many times, I think that probably the only significant message to be drawn from it is that there isn't just one ideal leadership style – in reality there are very many different styles of leadership that can, in their own way, be highly effective.

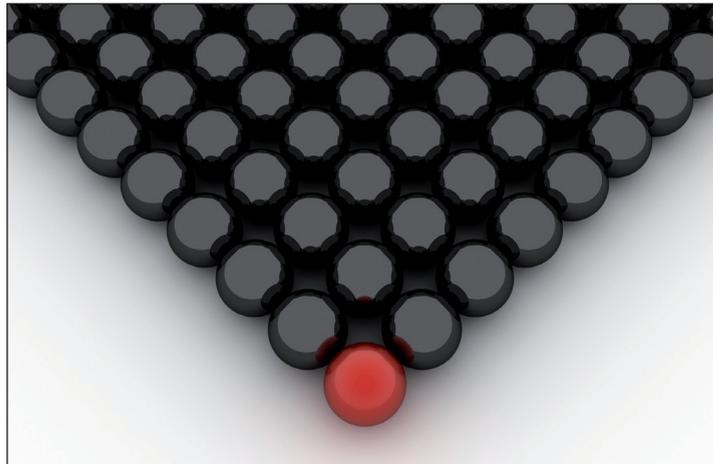
Don't forget



Being an excellent leader is about being yourself, not trying to emulate other excellent leaders.

It's important to be yourself

This should be seen as a very liberating conclusion. Being an excellent leader isn't about trying to emulate someone else's style. It's certainly not about trying to adopt a style of leadership that's out of step with your style and personality. We want to encourage you to spend time learning about yourself and your strengths and then to develop a style of leadership that works for you.



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As as you read this book, don't just take the ideas and concepts that are described at face value – don't slavishly follow the techniques as they're written. Instead, stop and consider how they can specifically work for you. Ask yourself:

- Are these techniques or ideas ones I should be practicing?
- How well do they fit with my personal values? (this is something we'll look at in the next chapter)
- How do these ideas fit with my personality traits? (again, something we'll cover in the next chapter)
- If it isn't something I can imagine adopting, how can I manage using alternative solutions?



Comfort zone

Whilst encouraging you to question the ideas in this book in order to understand how they'll work for you, don't use this as an excuse not to try things out; to continue with your current style or to convince yourself that your methods are very similar anyway.

You may be tempted to stick within your comfort zone and either avoid trying something different or try it briefly and then return to your old ways. Some of the techniques may prove very easy to put in place. Expect that more fundamental changes – especially to deep-seated behaviors – may take longer to embed and, as a result, initially feel very awkward to perform.

Learning to drive

If you're a car driver and can remember back to your early attempts at learning to drive, you may recall that some of the techniques and skills you were asked to try felt very unnatural at first. You may have even wondered whether you could ever become an accomplished driver. After just a few months' practice, however, you will have gained sufficient experience to be able to drive competently without needing to think about your actions.

Hot tip



Be prepared to experiment with new techniques and behaviors. You may not get things right first time but be prepared to persevere.

Beware

If people complain that leaders in the organization are not adding value, it probably means that there is something wrong with the way they're applying themselves as leaders.

Leaders Are Critical

You must have heard it. Employees saying how they feel they would be so much better off without their bosses. 'What value do they add to the working process?' 'Why do they need their boss?' 'Working life would be so much easier if they were just allowed to get on with their job... after all, their boss doesn't even know what they do half the time.'

Alarm bells

These complaints may or may not be valid but they're certainly not an indication that leadership isn't needed. They are more likely to be indications of other possible problems relating to a manager's style of leadership and this needs investigating.

In favour of leadership

So let's look at some of the key reasons why having leadership is so important. Excellent leaders will:

- Provide direction and focus at an individual and team level
- Ensure the climate in which people work is positive
- Ensure that the right resources are available and applied to the most appropriate activities
- Inspire people so they remain motivated and committed
- Recognise and develop people
- Ensure decisions are made effectively so things happen



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Direction and focus

Providing direction and focus is a critical element of Leadership. However well-intentioned people are, without someone to decide and communicate the direction in which the team is expected to be going in, there is a strong likelihood that people will channel their energies in less than productive ways.

Without leadership individuals can find themselves overlapping their activities with others' and duplicating effort or, alternatively, inadvertently leaving gaps in processes.

Some individuals may choose their own direction based on personal motivations. At worst, a whole team's activities could veer off in a wrong direction.



Climate

Put simply, climate can be described as 'how it feels to work around here.' The leader plays a key role in ensuring the climate people work in is positive. A positive climate is fundamental to delivering peak performance.

There are many elements that impact the climate within which people work, each of which can and should be measured. We'll look at these in more detail later in this chapter.

Decision-making

This is a critical function of an effective leader. Poor or slow decision making can lead to:

- A lack of confidence from those awaiting a decision
- The wrong decision being made leading to exposure to risk and potential financial or reputational loss
- Missed opportunities in the intervening time
- People misdirected to work on inappropriate activities

All of these are very likely to have a significant impact on the performance of those working under a leader.

Hot tip



As an effective leader, focus your attention on trying to ensure the climate in the organization is positive.

Why We All Need Leaders

Anyone who's experienced a truly excellent leader will understand what a positive and motivating experience it can be. Rather than feeling that the leader is a drag on their ability to get things done, they see their leader as someone who inspires and brings out the very best performance from them. If the leader has developed the right climate, they may not even necessarily need to be very conspicuous in their role as leader.



Positive benefits

Here are just a few of the ways in which people can benefit from working for an excellent leader. They will:

- Understand their role and how the work they do contributes towards the overall goals
- Feel a sense of worth about their role
- Have been encouraged to take their own personal development seriously
- Be confident they can ask questions, make suggestions and provide feedback, knowing they will be listened to
- Feel they can take (calculated, managed and appropriate) risks and feel they're supported
- Know they are trusted and empowered to act
- Feel an appropriate level of stretch and challenge in the things they do

Don't forget



Trust works both ways. As a leader, you want employees to trust you but you also need to have trust in your team.

Taking a Step Back

Leading from the front

It is often stated that leaders should be prepared to lead from the front. But this commonly used expression 'leading from the front' can be misleading and needs some clarification.

Typically this expression conjures up a war-torn battle scene with a commander heroically leading troops into battle, deep into enemy territory. This, of course, is some way off the reality of most modern leadership situations.

This type of leadership suggests a very hands-on or directive style with the leader getting stuck in with the delivery along with the rest of the team. This is generally not what a leader is expected to do unless they truly need to be a 'player-manager'.

Too much direct involvement can take a leader away from the things he or she should be doing. Followers are more likely to divert their energies towards trying to emulate their leader rather than be inspired to develop themselves and their roles. It can also discourage any sense of responsibility or empowerment.

The leader's perspective

As a leader you may need to pull yourself back from interfering with the delivery (unless this truly is a part of your role) and, instead, focus on getting the very most from those responsible and experienced at delivering. This is not about being elitist but it is ultimately about giving people clarity of direction and the support to help develop themselves and take responsibility.

Hot tip



The next time you are about to get involved in the detail, make a conscious effort to step back and focus on the big picture.



Leading vs. Managing

There is a big difference between leading and managing – it's worth clarifying the difference.

Being a manager

Many people have 'manager' in their job title but this doesn't necessarily mean that they are a leader of people. It's possible to be a manager of a function or process, (for example, an Accounts Manager) without having to lead people. If you do have people reporting to you, there are two key functions to your role:

- Managing people
- Leading people

In many ways these two activities need to be interrelated but the function of managing people, if separated out from leading people, can be seen merely as managing a set of processes just like any other business process. Activities will include:

- Directing and prioritizing work and delegating responsibilities
- Ensuring people have the necessary skills to do their work effectively
- Setting goals and standards and monitoring performance especially through appraisals
- Managing individuals' attendance; sickness; holidays; payroll etc



Cold and directive

It's possible (although far from ideal) to perform these activities as management activities without performing as a leader. Sadly, this is the case for many managers who seem to be able to manage people in a cold and process-orientated way and, as a result, don't maximize the full potential of their people.

Dealing with attendance, sickness, and holidays etc are, of course, still management functions that you may have to perform as part of your role but these should not be confused with leadership.

Hot tip



There is a big difference between being a manager and being a leader. Ensure you are clear of the difference.

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Blending the two

Being an effective leader is about applying leadership activities to many of the managerial functions. For example, delegating work – or rather, responsibilities – can be considered as an opportunity to empower and grow an individual.

Developing others

Determining training needs can and should be so much more than just identifying and resolving knowledge and skills gaps to enable an individual to do their job. Development from a leadership perspective means helping an individual to recognize their own development needs; giving them the confidence to perform their role excellently. It also means dedicating time to help guide them towards achieving their career aspirations.



By fostering the right environment, individuals can be encouraged to see every experience as developmental – as opportunities to assess themselves in different situations and learn from them.

Setting goals

As a leader, setting goals takes on a very different meaning. Instead of setting goals in a directive, boss-centred manner, leaders approach goal-setting as an opportunity to understand an individual and their motives. Goal setting becomes a joint activity where the individual is involved and empowered to play an active role in determining what needs to be achieved. What is more, they should have sufficient clarity about their role and overall organizational purpose to do so confidently.

Hot tip



Goal setting is best when it comes from the individual who, as a result, is likely to be more motivated to meet their own goals than those imposed by you.

Don't forget

Truly excellent leadership results in tangible and measurable performance improvements.

Beware

However excellent the leadership is, and however perfect the processes are, the human factor of individuals' own motivations should not be underestimated.

Effects of Good Leadership

The impact of providing excellent leadership is not just a handful of vague 'warm and fluffy' feelings. The net outcomes should be very tangible and, most importantly, measurable. A direct link can be made between leadership behaviors and practices and the hard bottom-line performance of the organization.



Leadership and processes

As we have already suggested, leadership behaviors have a direct impact on an organizational climate. You will see from the above diagram that a leaders' behaviors also have an impact on the organizational processes involved – for example, how people communicate with one another; how people make decisions; how people know what do etc.

Individuals' motivations

Of course, individual team members will have their own personal motivations and these, in turn, will impact overall performance. It is up to the leader to understand individuals' motivations and so work with each member of the team to ensure they remain energized and personally motivated whilst at the same time contributing positively towards the organizational goals.

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Clarity of Roles

Delivering consistently high performance within an organization requires more than just recruiting or retaining effective and motivated people. It is also essential that each individual is clear about his or her role and that they understand:

- How their role contributes towards the delivery of the organization's goals
- How their role needs to interact and communicate with others' roles in the organization
- How their role impacts others' roles i.e. who is dependent upon the outputs of their work
- What they need from others in order to perform their role (including support from their leader)



Part of this clarity comes from having well-defined structures and job definitions, part comes from how the leader communicates with individuals and delegates responsibilities.

Gaps and overlaps

Without sufficient clarity, there is a real danger that some roles will, to some degree, overlap. This can result in duplication of effort and wasted resource.

From a motivational point of view, individuals are likely to feel they've wasted their time and so may think twice about putting in so much effort in future. It can also lead to friction between the affected individuals who may feel their work or responsibilities are being high-jacked by the other.

Just as bad – especially from a customer's point of view – is for any lack of clarity in roles to result in gaps between roles where processes or responsibilities are not picked up by someone or only get picked up by chance.

Hot tip

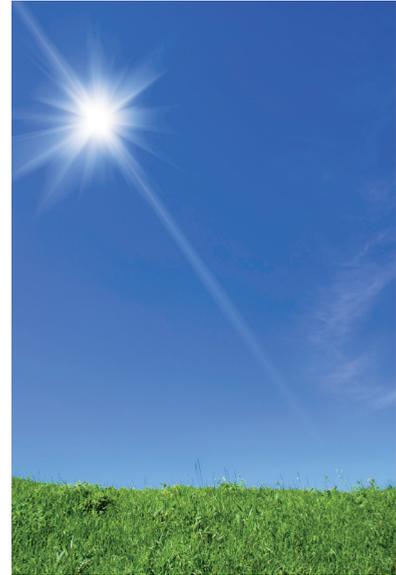


Ask individuals to review their own roles and ask them whether they experience any duplication of effort due to overlapping roles.

Creating a Positive Climate

You'll note from the diagram on page 16 that the organizational climate combined with the processes adopted are the most significant factors affecting performance in any organization and both of these are inextricably linked to a leader's behaviors. We'll explore leadership behaviors in detail in the next chapter. When we refer to organizational climate we are talking about factors such as:

- How clear people are about their roles and their contribution to the overall mission
- How empowered and trusted people feel in order to be able to work effectively within the scope of their roles
- How well people are recognized for their contribution towards achieving the organizational goals
- How defined and how flexible processes and structures are to support the work people do
- How people are developed to meet the needs of the organization as well as individuals' personal aspirations



Hot tip



Excellent leaders look out for opportunities to recognise and acknowledge high performance by their people.

In organizations where people are clear about their roles; empowered to work; recognized for their contribution and supported and developed, the resultant climate will be positive and, as a result, organizational output maximized.

Getting it right

All this sounds quite logical and straightforward. Yet, so often, managers don't get around to doing these things. This can be due to an over-enthusiasm to get things done; because they don't recognize the need to do these things or because they just don't know how to.

...cont'd

Translating the vision

Some leaders are described by others (or sometimes by themselves!) as visionaries – an important leadership attribute – but unless they're able to translate and communicate their ideas to those that need to deliver the vision, their visions will be wasted.

Similarly, once leaders have communicated the vision, they must be able to motivate, empower and energise people so that they work with the leader towards achieving that vision.



Confidence in others

One of the most important lessons to learn as a leader is to have confidence in those that work for and with you. Being a leader doesn't mean having all the answers. The higher up you are in an organization the less you are likely to need to know about the day-to-day operational detail and the more you need to trust others to focus on this and instead keep you apprised of progress.

Being a leader does not, as is often described, need to be a lonely role. Although final decisions and the vision may be signed off by the leader, they're likely to benefit from consultation with others who can bring to the table a number of different perspectives. This is something we'll explore in Chapter 4.

Developing yourself and others

There is a direct correlation between those who take personal development seriously – of themselves and others – and top performance. People who are encouraged to take responsibility for their own development are far more likely to be engaged, motivated and energized in all that they do. These are all factors that contribute towards creating a positive climate.

Beware



Being a visionary is more than just having inspirational ideas. They also need to be able to communicate these so that others can help turn them into reality.

Measuring The Impact

Measuring climate

The fact that the impacts of leadership behaviors can be traced right through to bottom-line performance means that it is possible – and advisable – to put in place a range of hard and soft measures to track the effectiveness of the organization and, in particular, the impact of leadership at various levels.

Measures can be used to keep a regular check on the climate of a whole organization, specific departments, or individual teams. By regularly monitoring, every 6 months or even annually, you can maintain a check on critical elements relating to the organizational climate – in particular, leadership behaviors – and so take action to bring about changes where necessary.

Here are just a few examples of possible measures:

- Employee surveys
- Customer satisfaction surveys
- Customer correspondence (praise and complaints)
- 360 degree feedback surveys on leadership
- Appraisal ratings and related verbatim comments
- Employee focus groups
- Prevalence of employee grievances



Hot tip



Using external help to assist with measuring climate can be very beneficial. Not only are they experts but they can also bring with them an independent perspective.

Getting help

You may be able set in place some measures without calling on specialist help but it can prove beneficial to get help from an external organization that can bring experience, independence and the opportunity to benchmark with other organizations.

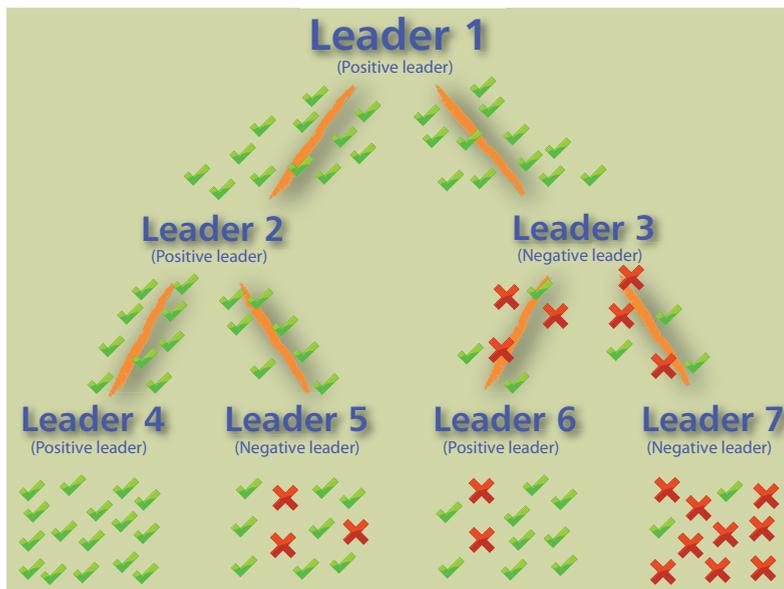
This is especially the case when looking to design a robust 360 degree survey. This ideally requires the collection and interpretation of anonymous responses from employees, bosses and potentially customers on leaders' behaviors.

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Making sense of the information

The effects of leadership, when measured across an organization can be very noticeable. Where there are layers of leadership in an organization, the positive climate encouraged and fostered by one leader can be either positively reinforced by the leader working immediately below them or, conversely, it can be negatively impacted or diluted depending on the quality of the leader at the next level down.

This is shown in the following diagram:



In this scenario, Leader 1 has, through effective leadership behaviors, created a positive climate (represented by the green check symbols). Leader 2, who is working under this positive climate has also created a positive climate, so reinforcing the overall positive climate.

Leader 3, on the other hand, through poor leadership behaviors, has reduced the overall positive climate (the negative impact is represented by the red crosses).

In the third layer, the individual leadership styles have, again either reinforced or weakened the overall leadership climate leading to very different climates, all within the same organization.

Beware



Don't assume, just because you have set in place a positive climate, that this will automatically flow through the whole organization.