

21st Century Leadership

Leadership behaviour

When organisations first became interested in leadership as opposed to management, most of the models available had their roots in a military model and since many organisations had a structure based on the military model, by and large they were relevant. However, times have changed. Organisational structures have changed. The increase in numbers of women in employment was the first of many changes to the makeup of the workforce and advances in technology have affected working practices in all areas. These changes have resulted in the military models of leadership becoming less and less relevant to the challenges of leadership in a 21st Century workplace and to less and less agreement about the nature of leadership and how to enable it in a modern organisation.

I believe that the actual process of leadership has not changed over the years but that the context in which that process takes place is continually evolving and therefore the actual behaviour of leaders also must be continually evolving.

Research has shown that people are most willing to follow the lead of a person who:

1. Provides direction:
The leader knows what they want to achieve and recognises that they cannot do it alone. They make it easy for people to see the connection between corporate or team goals and their own personal goals and they can help others to prioritise and plan. They show commitment and enthusiasm.
2. Walks the talk:
The leader is a living example of their own messages. They know what is important and they consistently demonstrate this in their behaviour.
3. Values people:
The leader recognises that they are only a leader if others follow them. They value the people who follow them and take time to listen, to understand and to answer questions. They are interested in people as individuals and not just in the context of work.
4. Keeps overview:
The leader keeps track of what is going on relating to their purpose and outcomes. They know who is doing what and can offer their support where it is most needed.
5. Encourages future leaders:
The leader recognises that they will not always be the best leader in all contexts. Coaching and encouraging

the leadership skills of others is today's leader's ultimate demonstration of their own leadership skill.

These demonstrations of leadership all involve communications. They are all features of the relationship between the leader and those they lead. So the art of leadership is an art of communication and relationship and the evolution of leadership behaviour is driven by the evolution of communication styles, culture, conventions and technologies.

By examining the context in which we wish to lead, we can predict the style of leadership that is most likely to succeed. Each organisation may be different in detail, but there are some obvious trends in organisational life that can act as guides to leadership in the 21st Century workplace.

The context

Over the last 10-15 years many organisations have changed their structure to become 'flatter'. They have removed some layers of middle management and brought Senior Managers closer to the front line. The benefits of this are offset to some extent by the increased number of direct reports that most managers now have to handle. In some organisations, rather than a flatter structure, there is now a 'matrix managed' structure where individuals may report to different managers in respect of different aspects of their job or for different purposes. In a matrix-managed organisation, the number of people you might have to deal with also will be greater than in traditional structures.

Another change has been that many industry sectors have seen a proliferation of mergers and acquisitions, resulting in large organisations with multiple sites and locations. It is now commonplace to work in a team that is spread out over more than one site even if it comprises a small number of people. The result of this is that the amount of face-to-face contact between members of a team or with their manager can be vastly reduced and people have become dependant on the telephone, audio-conferencing and email for day-to-day communications.

While we're on the subject of technology, another effect of email is that with minimum effort, we can now include a lot of people in an electronic message. This has engendered a tendency, in some organisations, to copy in lots of people on lots of messages. Many managers receive around 100 emails a day – not all of them relevant or useful, but still demanding attention. Members of their teams may also be struggling to keep up with a similar immense flow of information. Email can be an invaluable tool for those on split sites; it can also be a source of unnecessary 'noise' and stress.

Although separated from their own team many people find themselves working in large, open-plan offices with 'break-out' areas for meetings and very few private rooms. This means that if a manager wishes to have a significant conversation with a team member about his or her performance it may be obvious to those around them that something important is going on simply because they have removed to a meeting room. The content of the conversation may remain private, but the fact that it has happened will not!

The other reason that this kind of event can stand out is that, in general, there is a trend towards less formal culture in most organisations. 'Dress-down Friday' has given way to casual dress every day in many organisations and that relaxation of how we look has come hand-in-hand with informality in communications too. Few people now expect to have to address their boss formally as Mr or Ms – most of us expect to be on first name terms with everyone except perhaps the most senior of executives. This means that managers and leaders have to distinguish themselves in a team by their behaviour. It is no longer apparent to the casual observer who is in charge simply by looking at who wears the most expensive suit or is addressed formally by the others.

This informality can also be observed in meetings, where a comprehensive agenda or formal tabling of a motion is rare indeed. Conduct of meetings tends to be casual and informal, making it more difficult to keep focus and a sense of purpose. Often this means that meetings are lengthy and deliver insufficient value to the participants.

Informality means different things to different people and depending on a person's background, age and personal culture some behaviours are more acceptable than others in the workplace. Twenty years ago the corporate clone was commonplace and many of us worked with lots of people who were just like ourselves. We believed the same things, wore the same clothes, acted in the same ways and, by and large, agreed with each other. This could be very comfortable but in general it is a recipe for stagnation and many organisations are now aware of the benefits of diversity and actively promote it.

Of course, the benefits of diversity can only be realised if the people in an organisation have the skills to deal with others who are very different from themselves. At its worst, a diversity initiative will see the recruitment of people who are different from the 'norm' for that company and then the failure of those unfortunates to deliver anything. This happens when everyone else makes life difficult for them because they don't fit in!

One particular aspect of diversity that bears specific mention is age-related. In the last 20-30 years educational practices have changed and the experience of young people has been very different from the previous generation. In the 1960's and 70's most of us, if not actually scared of our teachers, at least showed them a lot of respect and did what they told us to do. When we joined the world of work, we afforded our bosses the same respect and did as we were told to do. Young people joining the workforce in recent years often have a much greater confidence in their

own judgement, are not afraid of authority and are much more willing to challenge what seems to them to be illogical, inappropriate or a waste of time. For managers who don't share this attitude it can be a culture shock to discover that 'because I said so and I'm the boss' is no longer a good enough reason for anyone to do anything.

So the business of leadership in the 21st Century is very different to that of preceding times. The question now is how to build leadership relationships in flat, informal cultures where many of the people are very different from yourself, are overloaded with information and will only follow your lead if you can sustain their attention for long enough to demonstrate its value.

The effects of the changes discussed above mean that for most managers and leaders in large organisations there are lots of people you need to influence and not much time face-to-face with those people. Therefore you have to be able to get a message across quickly, but you can't rely on the formal structure of a meeting to do it. It means having to deal with cross-cultural issues and manage relationships both within and outside your team. Above all, it means that you can't rely on your position to give you influence or authority; you have to create it by the way you behave.

Leadership in the 21st Century workplace is the art of influencing others by giving significant, motivating, messages in infrequent, informal but focused conversations. Hence the development of 'Leadership through Everyday Conversation' – a programme that combines a series of 1-day workshops with self-study material to hone your communication skills and make every conversation count.

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