The call for leadership

When the stakes are high and the solutions are few, the spotlight should fall firmly on leaders

By Lester Levy

The speed of change in business is fast, too fast and getting faster. You know this; you feel the turbulence. Global interconnectedness, ubiquitous information, changing workforce dynamics and attitudes, moral and ethical issues and the rising importance of social capital have brought about a new and intensified period of change. This change is unrelenting, resulting in a prevalent concern about a lack of leadership to overcome this challenge.

In this context, it is important not to reinforce the tempting notion that leadership is a romantic simplicity. There will be no dramatic arrival of an apocryphal knight on a white horse to rescue any business from its leadership predicament. Leadership is complex and if we are to develop more effective leadership in business, then we need to take the time to reflect on and understand leadership.

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

Leadership is an interesting and intriguing subject and has been described by James MacGregor Burns (1978) as “one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on Earth”.

Given its somewhat formless and ambiguous nature, how you define leadership is likely to set your co-ordinates for thinking about this topic.
The truth is, however, that in the modern model of leadership, followers don’t necessarily follow and leaders don’t always lead. At different times and in different situations, their roles are interchangeable.

**LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT**

According to Field Marshal Lord Slim: “There is a difference between leadership and management. The leader and those who follow represent one of the oldest, most natural and most effective human relationships. The manager and those managed are a later product with neither so romantic nor inspiring a history. Leadership is of the spirit, compounded of personality and vision – its practise is an art. Management is of the mind, more a matter of accurate calculation, statistics, methods, timetables and routines – its practise is a science” (Townsend and Gebhardt, 1997).

There is a strong perception internationally that businesses are over-managed and under-led and as a result it is important to reflect on the distinction between management and leadership. For most of us, the word “leader” tends to evoke an image of someone who is inspiring, visionary, courageous, creative and optimistic: someone worth following. The word “manager”, on the other hand, suggests quite a different image: steady, rational, analytical, ordered, rigid and controlling – someone you follow because you have to (Levy, 1998).

The distinction between management and leadership can be presented as varying shades of grey, but should be made with greater clarity. Leadership isn’t different to management because it is mysterious, nor is it different because it is better. I like to think of management and leadership as at different ends of the same continuum, distinctive but in harmony with each other, both indispensable for business success. In my view, leadership and management both have a critically important place. It just happens that leadership has first place.

One of the underlying problems that concerns me about modern management is that to an extent it relies on skills and ideas that have in many cases outlived their relevance. As a result, too much of modern management has become disconnected from employees, who in turn become disconnected to varying degrees from the customers. You would think that modern managers, with their breadth of education and experience, would have the insight to recognise this remoteness, but all too often they don’t.

The desire for power, implicit or explicit, is driven by varying degrees of self-interest, self-conceit and systemic selfishness. I hear many people say that you can’t be a top manager without an ego. If people mean having a sense of individuality, then I agree. But I think that the reality is that often they are talking not about ego, but about egotism.

If power and egotism, however covert, are key drivers of a modern manager’s mindset, decision
making, organisational perspective and views on managing personnel, then the widespread perception of over-managing and under-leading is not surprising.

DEVELOPING LEADERS

Any organisation committed to leadership will have considered some of the philosophical questions about developing leaders. The enduring debates in this realm are: “Can leadership be learned?” and “Are leaders born or made?” These questions can evoke a wide range of emphatic responses. The consensus from major contributors to research at the junction of leadership and education, however, is that leadership can be learned and that leaders are made. They now regard the “leaders are born” notion as a falsehood and that more than a favoured handful have the genetic password for leadership. Research has demonstrated that the significant components of leadership are both recognisable and learnable (Gardner, 1990).

The fact that the “leaders are born” school of thought refuses to die may only reflect the comfort some seek in reassuring themselves and others that their inability to show leadership capabilities is not their fault, as they do not have natural gifts.

In many ways, leadership is probably no different to any other activity in that those with greatest potential are likely to learn with greater ease. But those with less potential who make a more concerted effort to learn may well achieve greater success than those with higher potential, but are unwilling to make the effort. There will also be those who, despite making every effort, will find the concept of leadership elusive.

THE SKILLS OF LEADERS

Jay Conger (Doh, 2003) describes leadership across three dimensions: skills, perspectives and dispositions. I believe individuals have varying degrees of headroom to develop in each of these areas, largely dependent on their background, education and experience.

I believe most leadership skills can be taught reasonably easily. The dimensions of perspective and disposition, however, are more implicit and consequently more difficult to develop through formal or accelerated instruction.

In terms of developing leaders, there is a parallel to sport in that everyone wants to be a winner on Saturday, but only a few are willing to practise and prepare all week, in season and out of season. In reality, leadership is like an endurance sport. It requires constant practise and preparation, refinement and improvement, with learning being a continual process.

TOWARD POSITIVE SOLUTIONS

The most successful leadership development programmes are practical, contextual and experiential. The primary focus should be on developing an understanding of leadership, but perhaps the more critical element is developing an understanding of oneself. After all, the instrument of leadership is not like the scalpel for the surgeon or the palette for the painter, rather it is simply oneself. At its most elemental level, leadership is about mastery of oneself and this is the most difficult challenge of all.

Leadership development requires a diversity of teaching techniques and combinations of instructors or mentors. The right combination of teachers is essential to achieving highly refined outcomes, and choosing an appropriate teaching method for each individual requires experience and insight. Subtle differences in this area have a significant impact on learning.

Leadership teaching and development should not be exclusively focused on what has worked for others and those who have been successful. It is
important that those learning leadership should have exposure to business failures and poor role models. The deconstruction of the latter as a learning process can often be a more enriching learning experience than focusing only on what has been known to work.

The reality is that development programmes can be powerful, but those learning leadership skills will often become more in tune with their own leadership strengths and weaknesses when they begin to guide and develop others, particularly in a group or team situation.

CRITICAL LEADERSHIP QUESTIONS

What are the critical questions about leadership? Whenever I work with groups or individuals, I am always astonished at the diversity of response to the question: “What are the five critical questions you’d like answered about leadership?”

In my view, five of the more critical questions about leadership are:

- How does the leader gain mastery of self?
- If communication is the “oxygen” of leadership, how is effective communication achieved?
- How do you create a sense of purpose that touches people so deeply that they will fully commit themselves and persevere to achieve the goals?
- How do you achieve alignment of the majority to the sense of purpose and values of the organisation?
- What is the key to leadership?

MASTERY OF SELF

Our own leadership development requires the courage and insight to start with the most difficult and challenging human resource analysis you will ever face: yourself.

Whilst the personal styles of effective leaders vary quite considerably, significant work undertaken by Goleman and others in this field have determined that the most effective leaders do have a common element in that they all have a high degree of what has been described as emotional intelligence. This kind of intelligence revolves around the capability to manage ourselves and our relationships effectively. The fundamental components of emotional intelligence are: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills (Goleman, 1996, 1998, 2000).

Self-awareness is possibly the most critical of these five components and requires a profound, evocative and honest understanding of one’s own emotions, moods, strengths, limitations, needs and driving forces. Those with a high degree of self-awareness, in general, will reveal a strong and positive sense of self-worth and a comforting self-confidence.

As much as we need to manage our emotions, we cannot extinguish the underlying impulses that drive them. Self-regulation is represented by the ability to redirect or restrain disruptive impulses or moods. Those with a high degree of self-regulation are able to create environments of trust and teamwork. They are comfortable with ambiguity, open to change, skilful in overcoming obstacles and ready to seize opportunities. Self-regulation has both a positive and negative diffusion impact in an organisation or company. A calm and peaceful approach from leaders will generally promote their style right across an organisation or company, just as a tempestuous hot-head at the top will be likely to evoke similar responses to his or her own. Researchers have demonstrated that intense displays of negative emotion have never materialised as a force for good leadership.

Motivation manifests as a strong drive to be effective and make achievements that are not linked to incentives and rewards. Motivation in this context is the passionate desire to achieve, for the sake of achievement. At the core of this desire is an almost infinite reservoir of energy directed to meeting an inherent standard of excellence. These people are a magnet for complex challenges and are able to persevere, despite the forces against them. A sustained optimism, even in the face of stark adversity, is a hallmark of these people.

Of the five components of emotional intelligence, empathy stands out from the others as a concept not directly relevant to the tough commercial realities of business. Empathy must not be confused
with assuming other people’s emotions and then trying to please them. Empathy in the context of emotional intelligence is a critical skill of sensing other people’s emotions and giving consideration to these in the process of making decisions. The hallmarks of those with a high level of empathy include a magical ability in attracting and retaining top talent and in developing effective teams.

Social skills are pivotal to the fundamental influence relationship of leadership. It is not simply a matter, sadly, of knowing how to have fun at parties or just being friendly. It goes well beyond that to being able to inspire, influence, communicate and collaborate. At the heart of enhanced social skills is real ability to manage change, lead and develop teams and, most importantly, create a leadership system and culture that is effective and sustainable.

Mastery of oneself requires the development of emotional intelligence, which can be learned via highly refined, long-term teaching and guidance as opposed to learning analytic and technical abilities that require orthodox learning and teaching techniques.

It takes dedication, determination, effort and guidance for emotional intelligence to be learned and it is a key element in self-mastery, but it is not everything. Leadership is a synthesis of a wide range of capabilities and attributes and it is that process of synthesis that, in my view, separates the truly effective leader from the pack. True mastery of oneself is linked to this ability to synthesise and is one of the most important links to successful leadership.

**EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**

I often hear modern management blaming the failure to succeed on what they like to call “employee resistance to change”. In my experience, this is often an oversimplification and lack of recognition of the main reason for the failure, which is inability of management to communicate effectively.

Communication is not a one-way information flow, verbally or in writing. Communication requires listening by both parties as well as interaction, which helps develop a shared understanding – which is what communication is actually about. In my experience, of the three elements that comprise communication – talking, listening and understanding – poor or inadequate listening is the major cause of failure to communicate effectively.

Many authors on the subject of business success have identified under-communication as a problem and the cause of below-average performance. I agree with this if by under-communication they mean under-listening. I cannot see how any manager can win any employee’s commitment to something that employee does not clearly understand.

The skill of listening, in my view, ranks as one of the most important skills a leader needs. It is essential to clarify the difference between hearing and listening, a fundamental and critical understanding for any leader. The differentiation between the two is that hearing is a neurological process (the ability to process transmitted sound waves), whilst listening involves making sense out of what is heard. Good listening takes considerable time and earnest application.

Leaders listen with what I call the “third ear”, which means carefully understanding what is being said. This is important, because the consequence of not listening with a “third ear” is to lose the opportunity to make a heart-to-heart connection, which is critical to gaining commitment.

Effective communication does, however, require more than highly developed listening skills, particularly if it is to inspire. I do not know about
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you, but I do not feel particularly inspired, confident and, most importantly, moved if I’m listening to a message of critical importance that has to be read from a written speech. To me, that seems like a message coming not from the heart and soul, possibly not even from the mind, but from some speechwriter’s pen. Communication, to be effective, needs to be from the heart, it needs to be honest and it needs constant repetition and discussion, until it is truly understood by all.

Do all of this and you will still have not done enough to achieve the goal of effective communication. The most imaginative, powerful communication will be stopped dead in its tracks by non-verbal communication that does not run parallel to your verbal communication. The old-fashioned method of leading by example, by your actions, still counts for far more than your words.

Speak less, say more … live by what you say: your actions speak louder than your words.

**SENSE OF PURPOSE**

The creation of a sense of purpose or a vision for an organisation or company is one of the critical elements of leadership and it justifiably has pre-eminence in the leadership literature.

Creating a sense of purpose or vision is not the same as creating a plan. It is something much more important and fundamental. It is the creation of direction: a clear, credible, relevant and understandable future that inspires individuals to act collectively to reach the destination. In a very real sense, the purpose defines where the organisation or company is now and the journey to its destination. An effective and meaningful sense of purpose will emotionally connect with individuals, with their heart and with their soul, and then they will put their mind and muscle to making it happen. A purpose is not just about logic, it is about emotion, passion, enthusiasm and optimism … it is about what can be done, not just about what must be done.

At the core of creating a sense of purpose or vision is the development of strategy that defines what will be done to reach the destination. This is not mystical. Rather it is a highly disciplined and embracing process of strategic thinking. It is not a matter of finding the newest and most imaginative ideas. Instead, it is creating the pattern of thinking that is relevant and right for that organisation or company. The development of a sense of purpose or vision is not a competition to determine how clever you may be. It is not its uniqueness that is important, but the ability to capture the future.

Effective leadership realises that the link between aspiration (created by a sense of purpose or vision) and achievement is simply the ability to get things done. This requires the ability of the leader to create all the important and relevant linkages to effectively execute the strategy.

**ALIGNMENT**

This process of alignment is all the more challenging in the midst of significant change. As identified by John P. Kotter (2001), alignment is different from organising people, which is often pursued from a structure and systems perspective. Kotter points out that alignment is more of a communications challenge than a design problem.

The reason why alignment is so important to achievement and effective leadership is the reality of interdependence of personnel, processes and technology as well as the simple fact that in any organisation or company each individual’s contribution to the objectives, goals and purpose is in large part at their discretion. Alignment allows people to take initiative and act flexibly, including making decisions at the appropriate level … and with speed.

Critical to alignment is empowerment, which clarifies notions of authority, accountability and responsibility, and thereby shifts the model from one of dependence to interdependence, which is critical to achievement. The paradigm that promotes the view that managers do the thinking, supervisors the talking and employees the doing will never lead to alignment. Empowerment is a logical and understandable concept, grasped and
appreciated by many, but implemented in its pure sense by so few.

Empowerment is critical to alignment, which is critical to achievement and success. True empowerment of employees is important as it confirms their underlying worth, it will inspire them and by developing a climate of trust, build their self-confidence. In my experience, employees with both competence and confidence form a powerful cocktail for exceptional performance.

To empower others is to take a risk, you must accept failures and mistakes, which will occur, without resorting to punishing those who have failed or erred. Empowerment needs an environment of trust and won’t work in a climate of fear. Trust is an emotional bond that relates to consistency and predictability, and it has a powerful relaxing effect on organisations and companies in their quest for communication, stimulating creativity and innovation, encouraging teamwork, courtesy and genuine respect for others (especially customers).

CREDIBILITY

The key to leadership is simply credibility. It is the heartbeat of leadership and without it, I do not believe that it is possible to lead. Like the nucleus in a human cell, credibility is the nucleus of leadership. You can preside over an organisation or company by virtue of your position and its vested authority, but you will not be able to lead it without credibility.

Credibility is not issued with the job title and business card. There is nothing automatic about credibility. It is something that you need to go out and earn. In the greatest sense of poetic justice, gaining credibility is the responsibility of the leaders themselves and the only people who can gift them that credibility are the potential followers.

In a timeless observation, James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner (1993) identified that leadership is “a reciprocal relationship between those who choose to lead and those who decide to follow”. The decision to follow is inextricably linked to credibility. Can people believe in you, in what you say and most importantly in what you do?

Leadership is not simply a matter of minds; it is a matter of souls. The call for more and better leadership can be answered. If more needs to be done, then through leadership development more can be done, but in the end, the decision to lead is yours to make. It is your choice ... make it!

REFERENCES


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