



Great leaders are authentic leaders

Discover how to develop great leaders by playing to their inherent strengths



A successful business depends on effective leadership, and organizations that make the necessary investment in leadership development are the ones that tend to perform best. Where this investment has not been made, there can be problems with communication, morale, cohesion, and general business direction. All of which limits an organization's chances of survival in times of crisis.

This paper proposes that even the best leaders have to work on their skills – no individual is born for a leadership role without further need for development. Equally, it asserts that there is no single personality 'type' that can be guaranteed to deliver good leaders either. Arguing that mentoring and the teaching of leadership competencies can lead to staleness, it suggests that the development of authenticity – a leader's unique personality and natural style – steered by the effective use of psychometrics, can deliver the flexibility and clear-sightedness that engenders good leadership.

Introduction

Effective leadership in organizations is crucial to business success. Leaders have key responsibilities in setting direction for the organization, inspiring others to work towards that direction, and mobilising the effective accomplishment of goals. Put simply, if the leadership is not effective, organizations with otherwise flawless credentials can fail.

According to CIPD research, 98% of managers believe that well designed leadership development activities have a positive impact on the bottom line, while 91% believe there is a direct link between organizational performance and investment in this area.

Effective leadership is vital for productivity, the company's long-term sustainability, bottom-line profits, and workforce turnover. At an individual level, it has a positive impact on employee engagement and motivation. This is vital: there are few greater business assets than a contented workforce.

Poor leadership and teams

Ineffective team leadership has a negative impact on productivity and bottom-line profitability, at an organizational, team and individual level. For teams and organizations, it can result in:

- Poor or inconsistent communication of goals and strategy
- Lack of clear direction and cohesion, leading to uncertainty over roles and responsibilities
- Lack of agility in tackling business challenges and seizing opportunities
- Ineffective use of resources
- Low motivation, low productivity and unmet business targets
- High staff turnover through disengagement
- Unhealthy competition, with individual agendas coming to the forefront, fuelling an already hostile working environment.

Poor leadership and the individual

Working for an ineffective leader can have serious consequences for staff. Negative impacts include:

- Lack of praise and recognition

- Restricted opportunities for employees to express their views or contribute towards strategy and decision-making
- Lack of personal development opportunities
- A feeling of 'no-one appreciates my skills', resulting in a decrease in motivation and engagement
- This in turn can lead to loss of self-esteem, lethargy, depression, and poor health.

Keeping it together in times of crisis

Many would argue that a true test of leadership is whether the individual can remain effective in a crisis or in challenging times, maintaining a clear strategy as well as focusing on day-to-day practicalities. Today's economic climate, beset by uncertainty, instability, and consequent financial difficulties for organizations has put increased pressure on leaders to respond proactively to changing market conditions, while keeping costs to a minimum.

The resulting organizational restructures, flattening of reporting structures, and consequent reallocation of roles and resources can lead to feelings of uncertainty, threat and increased pressure amongst employees. In these trying circumstances, leaders have a vital role to play in maintaining stability, focus and motivation levels amongst employees.

Born to rule?

The study of leadership effectiveness and the creation of models and theories that attempt to define the 'ideal leader' is not a new concept. Early approaches to leadership focused simply on the core personality traits, or innate characteristics, of the individual. The aim was to understand the personality characteristics of great military leaders and statesmen based on the assumption that successful leaders were born to lead. This characterised the understanding of leaders from the 1930s to the 1950s.

As the study of people became more behavioural, leadership science focused on what leaders did, rather than purely on their underlying personality. This led to the evolution of competencies in the 1980s, as attempts were made to describe behaviour according to the business outputs of a leader (eg Inspiring Communication, Achieving Excellent Results, etc). As the decade advanced, other researchers looked at situational aspects of leadership.

In the 1990s, the spotlight shifted to the interactions between leaders and followers, and then, towards the end of the decade, the concept of 'Emotional Intelligence' shaped views of leadership.

Theories over the last decade have looked at leadership as part of a complex system, with an increased consideration of the ethical and values-based aspects of leadership.

Self-awareness – the key to effective leadership

Given these complexities, what is the swiftest way of becoming a more effective leader?

The answer lies in self-awareness. Before a leader attempts to change or develop anything, they should gain a better understanding of who they are and their unique style. Understanding personality can help to stimulate better self-awareness, and suggest alternative approaches, so that leaders can be more confident in finding the best fit for their skills and applying the right leadership at the right time.

When talking about leaders, many of us make the mistake of operating on a preconceived stereotype of a single kind of leader. The pervasive illusion is that leaders need to be bold, dynamic and extraverted. In other words, we expect our leaders to be driven and to be drivers. However, it is arguable that one's potential to be a good leader will depend on whether or not who we are is compatible with the needs of our current situation, organization, those we are leading, and the defining spirit or mood of a particular time or culture.

Leadership development should be based on an appreciation of unique personality and natural style

Winston Churchill is a prime example: a great wartime leader, but much less successful as a peacetime leader. This difference in perceived success resulted from a clash of personal style and historical circumstance. Churchill's resolute insistence that Britain would not be defeated was highly effective in motivating the population during a war that could be won. However, the same approach in the face of the unstoppable decline of the British Empire was futile. Churchill's style suited one circumstance much better than the other; he was a great leader when the times allowed it.

Authenticity

Instead of looking at effective leaders as having the 'right' personality, which implies that there is a single personality type that makes a good leader, it is more helpful to work with the individual to develop their leadership capabilities based on an appreciation of their unique personality and natural style. Most leaders are capable of developing and improving their effectiveness, given the right support and training.

This concept of authenticity is at the core of a modern approach to leadership development. By focusing primarily on the individual leader, it is possible to enable them to become aware of their own unique and genuine potential. The leader is then in a good position to manage the interface between themselves, their organization's requirements and the wider competitive environment.

This approach challenges the view that effective leaders can only be developed through mentoring and the development of a set of leadership competencies. While these approaches have their place in leadership development, if they are not balanced with approaches that bring out the authenticity of a leader, there is a danger that organizations will develop clones among the leadership team. Consequently, the organization may suffer from 'group think', become myopic and lose its ability to respond effectively to a diverse range of challenges.

There is a danger that organizations will develop clones among the leadership team

Four leadership goals

This approach to leadership development is based around the belief that there is more than one way of being a great leader. However, success boils down to understanding what organizations need from their leaders, and finding a way of developing leaders' skills consistent with their strengths and individual styles. Specifically, research has suggested that leaders must achieve the following four leadership goals:

Increasing trust and communication

This is about increasing the depth, breadth and resilience of relationships, both within the organization and with external clients. By increasing the leader's level of self-awareness,

and their understanding of others' communication styles and preferences, barriers to effective communication are removed.

It is important for leaders to create systems and processes that facilitate two-way communication with their staff. In order to build trust, it is crucial for leaders to invite and respond to feedback in an open-minded and consultative way, demonstrating their genuine willingness to make changes.

In contrast, many leaders make the mistake of reacting defensively to feedback, or merely paying lip-service to requests for change from staff.

This awareness and understanding of other people's reactions is one of the key aspects of Emotional Intelligence, and the ability to manage these reactions in a positive way is a key feature of effective leadership.

Managing conflict effectively

High-performing businesses need their leaders to do far more than merely settling disagreements and resolving conflicts as they occur. A leader must capitalise on diversity of opinion and conflicting ideas within the business, viewing them as positive forces, in order to reach the best and most innovative solutions. This means working through dissent and divergence, making tough and unpopular decisions and energising people around goal accomplishment.

It is crucial for leaders to clearly and openly communicate strategy, mission and goals so that staff have a strong sense of purpose and well defined milestones to achieve. Understanding different perspectives and viewpoints, getting to the root causes of unhappiness and frustration, and providing a clear rationale for why changes are being made are all crucial to the effective management of conflict. Leaders should also seek to avoid accusations of favouritism by being equally available and responsive to all their staff.

It is crucial for organizations to take a proactive approach to equip leaders with the skills necessary to effectively address conflict situations. In doing so, they will be making a long-term investment in their people through improved staff retention, greater productivity and the development of a more open and trusting culture.

Building organizational capability

This goal is achieved when a leader enhances the

organization's capacity for sustained high performance. A critical aspect of a modern leader's role is to ensure that the organization is equipped to deal with future challenges, and is not over-dependent upon a single individual to meet these challenges. This involves identifying high performers within the team or organization and developing their talents in order to improve organizational capability and adaptability.

In general, developing and empowering staff is an excellent way to make individuals feel valued, trusted and consulted, securing the future by developing the next generation of leaders. An effective leader will promote a coaching culture, giving staff sufficient training and knowledge to take responsibility and make decisions. If staff are not empowered to take the reins in the leader's absence, important decisions may not be made, at a potentially heavy cost to the organization – and with staff left feeling undervalued. Ongoing training and development is crucial in all organizations to build up people's ability to take on increased responsibility.

The best leaders are those who can skilfully adapt their style to meet the needs of the situations they confront.

By taking important steps to develop this competence in leaders, organizations are making a long-term investment in their people through improved staff retention, greater productivity and the development of a coaching culture. In contrast, failing to identify and develop talent, ignoring conflict and avoiding difficult conversations can create an avoidance culture within organizations, where poor performance is not tackled and high performers are not recognised. This can have a negative impact on an organization in terms of productivity and long-term succession planning.

Existing members of staff can be developed by creating new posts, using existing expertise better, investing in external training courses and introducing mentoring schemes and work shadowing opportunities to allow staff to learn new skills.

Developing good appraisal systems can also allow organizations to uncover employee development needs and work preferences.

In addition, recruiting new members of staff with different skill sets and fresh perspectives can be invaluable in maintaining a competitive edge in the market. Attracting the brightest talent ensures that new and innovative business strategies continue to be developed.

Driving organizational strategy

For leaders in all functions and at all levels, achieving this goal means aligning the plans and activities of their teams with the competitive strategy of the business. This requires balancing long-term goals with more immediate needs, and developing the skills to influence broadly across diverse interest groups and networks.

Creating a regular interactive forum where staff are briefed on the organization's vision, strategy, and short-, medium- and long-term goals can help align an organization so that all employees are 'on the same page' in terms of strategy. Action plans derived from this strategy should be SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound), with clear roles and responsibilities, and clarity around how and when success will be measured.

Finally, identifying a unique positioning for products and services in a competitive market is another crucial determinant of business success. Business leaders must have a thorough understanding of current and future market conditions, competitor businesses and potential gaps in the market in order to identify new territories and market space for the organization to exploit.

The MBTI framework and the effective use of psychometrics

The MBTI Step I tool is a prime example of how psychometrics can add value in leadership development. Although certain personality types tend to predominate among leaders, there is growing evidence that people in charge vary widely in their styles and approaches to leadership.

Research confirms that the most effective leaders are those who possess higher levels of self-awareness, self-management and empathy. This reflects the ability to understand and regulate one's own emotions and those of others. Recent studies have shown that this ability represents anything from 30 to 70 percent of leadership success.

The MBTI framework can help to improve leadership abilities in ways that not only fit an individual's own job situation, but also match their personality preferences. Understanding your personality type and how it influences your thinking, behaviour and relationships will help you become a stronger leader – by maximising your ability to understand yourself, manage your behaviour and relate to others.

The MBTI instrument helps leaders gain a better understanding of their leadership style and identify their particular strengths. It also allows them to examine habits or blind spots that might be limiting their success and effectiveness as a leader. If a leader only considers issues from a particular perspective or thought process, the resulting blind spots can quickly lead to poor decision-making. More generally, this is likely to impede the leader's overall effectiveness, especially in terms of communication, conflict management and problem-solving.

Conclusion

Most, if not all, leaders can improve their effectiveness. Research indicates that the best leaders are those who can skilfully adapt their style to meet the needs of the situations they confront and the people they lead.

By encouraging leaders to uncover and deal with blind spots in their thinking, organizations create a broader and more balanced perspective for future decision-making. Leaders can take steps to overcome these blind spots through personal development. This will enable them to respond more effectively to staff with a broader repertoire of communication, thinking and decision-making styles.

By seeking to balance opposing forces and views, using all eight of the MBTI preferences, leaders can increase their effectiveness, bridge the gaps in their thinking, and avoid the pitfalls of ineffective decision-making.

Leaders should be aware of how they approach situations of conflict, and of how the other people involved typically deal with such situations. Everyone has their own style, and what may be the right approach for one situation is not necessarily appropriate for another.

By creating individual leadership plans which are tailored specifically to the individual's unique style and personality preferences, leaders can broaden their views and stretch themselves to try new behaviours, while staying true to their natural style.

Notes

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