

The Leadership Challenge

"To be a more effective leader, you must be skilled at being yourself, more, with skill."

Times are hard for team leaders; goalposts keep moving, structures shifting, processes changing, skills requirements changing. And that's just inside the business; on the outside customers are demanding more and your competitors are hungry for a piece of the action. And in the middle of all that you're supposed to get the work done, keep the team happy and run a smooth operation. Oh, and at higher quality, with fewer resources and at greater profit. Your team may not like it; you may not like it (although you obviously can't say) and when you turn to your boss for help, she says she hasn't got time; you're the team leader, that's what you're paid for. This is the leadership challenge for many in front line team leadership roles.

So what to do? Much of the literature about leadership seems to be of little practical help. Would it really make a difference if you listed the characteristics of great leaders and cultivated them in yourself? Or developed a powerful and inspirational vision of the future? Or realigned the work to better match the intrinsic motivations of team members you've inherited not selected? All well and good in theory I hear you say, but it's not going to work in my world. Reading about leadership, it's easy to think it is some grand, ethereal subject that will take a lifetime to master and probably won't help much. But there is another, more practical take on it; that leadership is action.

Leadership is action

We can all think of situations when people have made a difference to a situation through an act of leadership. Take, for example, Gary, an engineer who had the courage to disagree with a proposed new rota, raised a problem everyone else was ignoring and helped develop a better solution. Or Tina, the team assistant who rallied the team after losing a big contract, analysed what went wrong and got them back on track. Or Steve, the technician, who took it upon himself to reorganise the workshop and made the whole operation much slicker. These are everyday *acts of leadership*, acts that move things on. And, interestingly, acts that are not the exclusive domain of those with leadership titles or positions. If leadership is action then anyone can be a leader, at least anyone with the courage, will, commitment and skill to act to make a difference.

Leadership is about everyday action, what people do, what they say and the impact they have in the hundreds of everyday situations that call for leadership (writ little or large); when briefing the team, explaining a task, discussing performance, counselling, solving a problem, tackling a crisis or introducing a change. Whether preparing a team for battle or sorting out a problem with someone's expenses, leadership is about acts that move things forward. Becoming a better leader is about understanding and taking effective action.

Leadership is relationships

But action doesn't happen in a vacuum. As any physicist will tell you, action leads to reaction, in this case the reaction of other people - team members, customers, colleagues, and bosses. Leadership is not something we do to other people, it is something we do with other people, it is something forged in the relationship between leader and led. There are no leaders without followers; relationships and impact matter. ¹

Effective leaders actively nurture and maintain a complex network of relationships. They know when to be close to people and when to be distant, and use relationships to keep people focused on goals and address poor performance without pulling rank. Pulling this off demands skilful communication in a variety of settings - from platform speeches to intimate one to ones. To be effective you need to understand how you are seen, heard and experienced by others, what works for you and what doesn't, what gets results and what gets in the way. A leader's professional and technical competence matters but it's their people and relationship skills are just as critical when it comes to getting things done.

Leadership is situational

What action is needed to move things on depends upon the situation, the demands of the task and the demands of the people; that's why there's no rule book, effective leadership is situational.² Different situations demand different kinds of leadership or maybe even different leaders. Think of Winston Churchill, an inspirational war-time leader, but with a style that was poorly-suited to the task of reconstructing post-war Britain. Effective leadership involves reading situations, assessing what is required, determining what you can offer and then acting. There are no universal leadership characteristics, no universal rules of action that will work in all settings and situations. Indeed, the dynamics may be so complex that what works for one leader may not work for another. Effective leaders sense when leadership is called for, know what capacities they have to deploy and mobilise those that will make a difference, or get out of the way and let somebody more suited take the lead.

Leadership is who you are

To do this leaders need to understand their leadership assets and liabilities and the impact they have on others. You need a reasonable degree of self awareness to lead effectively.³ But when we say 'leader know thyself' we're not talking about the deep introspection of hermits or getting a degree in emotional intelligence. No, what leaders need is a sound and well rounded understanding of their leadership style and how it affects others - what works and what doesn't. Without this it's hard to leverage and deploy your skills to good effect and easy to unwittingly upset the applecart, the team and your leadership career. That's why self awareness is emphasised in leadership development; because your effectiveness in any leadership role is inextricably linked with who you are behind that role - who you are as a person, your character, personality, traits, behavioural style. Being effective as a leader is about being skilled at "being yourself, more, with skill."⁴

Developing your leadership skills

Effective leadership is about what works for you, with the people you are leading in the situation you are in. It's about the relationships you build, your reading of what is needed, the action that you take and the results that you get.

During the workshop you have been invited to attend, you will be invited to actively explore situations where leadership can make a difference and to consider the kinds of leadership acts and actions that help move things on. This is no talking shop though, the emphasis is on learning through action and reflection. Through exercises, activities and practice scenarios we will watch out for acts of leadership, big or small, and then ask why was it an act of leadership? What did it achieve? How did it move things forward? What was it made of? We may also experience and explore acts of un-leadership – things people do that un-inspire and un-create, and there is a third possibility – that acts of leadership don't happen, that you, the situation, the group, need clarity, inspiration or purpose, and you don't get it. Through this and without much recourse to grand theories we hope to go some way towards finding out what leadership means to you, what works for you, what kind of leadership emerges from your experience and your thinking and from what you actually do, and see one another do.

The workshop is about exploring what you bring to your leadership role, what moves you to act and the effectiveness of your actions. Expect to be challenged and come with your own examples of times when you have experienced both effective and less effective leadership. We hope you will enjoy the experience and look forward to working with you.

References:

¹*The human side of management*, T Teal, *Harvard Business Review*, Nov/Dec 1996

²*Leadership and the one minute manager*, K Blanchard, P Zigarmi, D Zigarmi, HarperCollins, 2000

³*Why should anyone be led by you?* R Goffee G Jones, *Harvard Business Review*, Sep/Oct 2000

⁴*The lizard kings*, R Goffee, G Jones, *People Management*, 26 January 2006

⁵*What do leaders really do?* J Kotter, *Harvard Business Review*, May/June 1990