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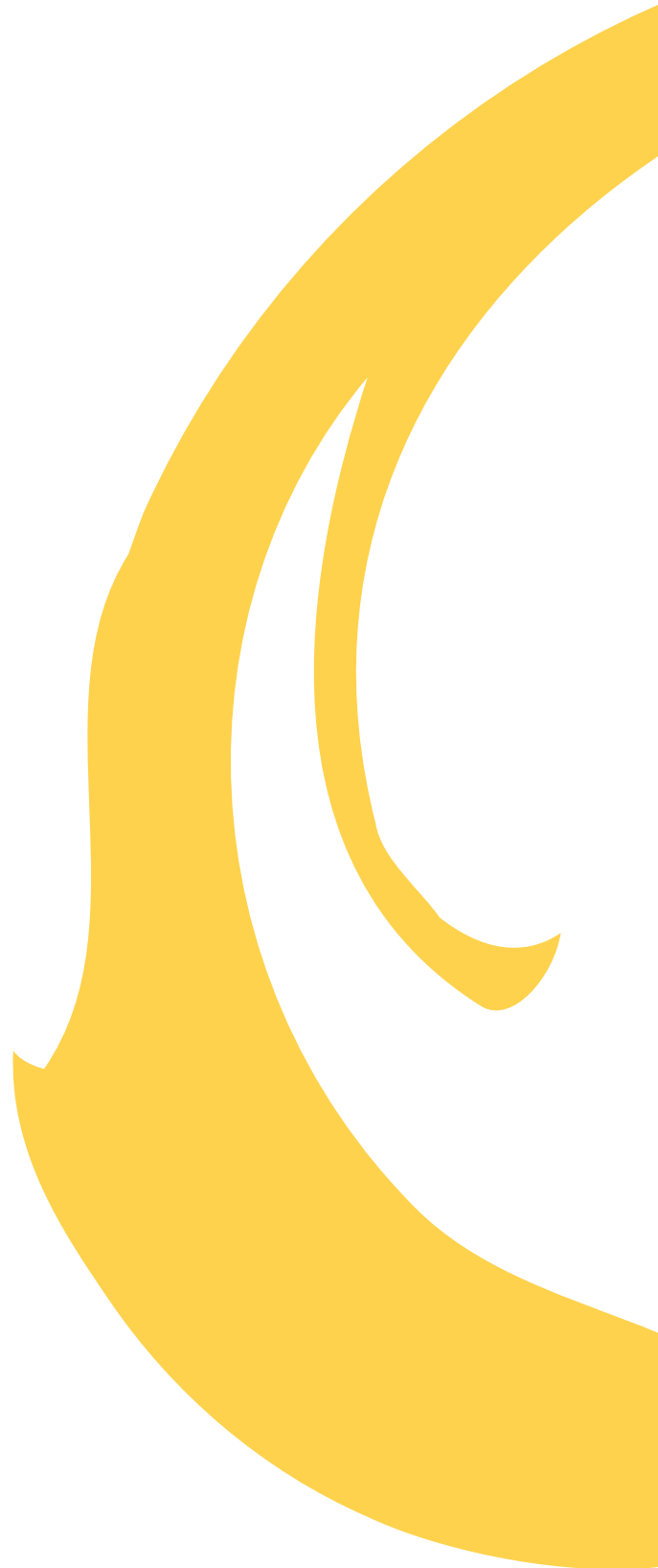
Reframing Leadership

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Leadership or lack thereof continues to be as topical today as it has been throughout the ages. Hardly a day passes when we aren't exposed to some groundbreaking new research or witness to the perceived excesses and failures of our corporate high flyers. The media is often quick to vilify such people. But how serious is this so called 'crisis of leadership' and how much is just an oversimplification of a much wider and far more pervasive ailment? Are new leadership theories the answer, or are we simply dealing with the fundamentals of effective behaviour change?

New fads and fantasies

The answer to this question rests in the preferred leadership models and frameworks that many hold dear to heart. These often address our deeply held personal perspectives on what a good leader looks like and how does one make a good leader. For example, depending upon which school of thought you might subscribe to, leaders are either 'born or made'. This is the classic nature versus nurture argument and tends to strongly influence the type of leadership development approach one takes. The advocates of the former approach support the idea of assessment and selection whereas the latter assumes that leadership can be learnt.

Such models provide useful input to the leadership debate; however, they often fail to withstand the practical reality of 'leadership' in the modern world. As many aspiring leaders have discovered, it's less to do with 'nature versus nurture' and more to do with understanding the complexity of the situation and the role that leadership plays in achieving the needs of competing stakeholders. The 'great man' theory, for example, has a sense of romantic appeal within society particularly if you happen to fit this demographic profile. Unfortunately it excludes a great number of others (women and minority groups in particular).

Very few organisations achieve greatness on account of the efforts of one individual only. Many leadership theorists have explored leadership at the individual, group and organisational levels (Hackman, 1990; Hallam & Campbell, 1992; and Smith, Salas, & Brannick, 1994). And if leaders are born not made, then why all the interest and effort around developing leaders? Shouldn't we just be targeting those with natural leadership ability and ignoring the rest? A focus on leadership selection over and above development?

Some people are more capable leaders than others, but there are often a range of factors influencing performance that exist aside from the nature versus nurture debate. Hersey and Blanchard (1982), Adair (1983) and Hackman (1986) all suggest that the relationship between the leader, followers, task and situation impacts leadership effectiveness and therefore business outcomes. Personality, traits, values and attitudes have also been found to influence the same (Kroeger and Thuesen 1988; Hogan, 1991; Cummings, 1992). Finally, concepts and models based on charismatic and transformational leadership (Tucker, 1968; Bass & Avolio, 1994 and Burns, 1978) have created a virtual smorgasbord of options available for the leadership theorist.

The simple fact remains: solving the leadership challenge is not simple; if it was we wouldn't be reading about it so often. After all, what would our retiring politicians, generals and business leaders do with themselves if these burning issues were no longer relevant?

An effective approach recognises the contribution that a vast range of theories makes to the leadership challenge. It also highlights the fact that different approaches are the favoured solutions of various leadership advocates. A development approach tends to favour nurturing theories – 'leaders can be trained'. Recruitment and selection relies on the approach that 'great leaders' exist and 'identification' is the key strategy. In this case psychological models emphasise the impact of personality and the influence of both nature and nurture through a testing and assessment approach. It soon becomes apparent that the leadership issue is a challenging one to navigate for theorists, consultants and aspiring leaders alike.

So many models, so few solutions

The gap between the current state of leadership and some future 'ideal' still exists in many organisations. Whether this occurs at the organisational level in terms of leadership culture or at the team and individual levels you would question why the gap exists at all given that there is such a range of leadership models and frameworks on offer. One of the main reasons for lack of traction rests in the over-emphasis on leadership models as a source of competitive advantage over the more practical (and less seductive) challenges of implementation and sustainability.

To borrow from the wider business research (Collins and Porras, 1994; Collins, 2001 and Hubbard, et. al., 2002) the leadership development strategy is only as effective as the execution. A sound leadership model is important, but the model is only as good as the business results that are delivered through leadership behaviours demonstrated throughout the organisation. In fact, it is an interesting exercise to explore the common traits, values and behaviours that comprise the majority of contemporary leadership models and frameworks. Most explicitly or implicitly share a common base encompassing values like honesty, integrity and fairness. When considering personality, effective leaders possess self-control, emotional stability and openness to change. And finally, such leaders share common abilities like effective communication, influencing and problem-solving skills. This list is not intended to be comprehensive, but it highlights the fact that with little effort one could produce a common list that would encompass much that is contained in the various leadership models and frameworks that are commonly available. A similar exercise will yield common dimensions that many contextual models share by describing the inter-relationship between the leader, follower and external environment.

Then there is the debate regarding an 'accepted researched and validated' leadership model versus one developed by an organisation for internal application. Many companies travel down the 'home-grown' leadership path, much to the derision of the academics and leadership development companies. Here, the real question again is one concerning effectiveness in terms of behaviour change. If the home-grown version is a close fit to the 'common' model (in terms of the previous discussion) then surely the issue is more to do with implementation. In fact, there may be greater likelihood of success when organisations achieve a high degree of buy-in and commitment to a leadership model that has been developed through close consultation with internal stakeholders as opposed to an off-the-shelf solution that has been introduced externally.

Key success factors

So what differentiates the more successful initiatives from those that fail to make a lasting impact? Excellence in developing leadership capability at the individual, team and organisational level rests in a balanced approach that addresses all of the following nine factors.

1. A clearly understood business-case

There has to be a compelling and widely understood reason for undertaking any leadership development initiative in the first instance. Leadership development for its own sake has a limited shelf-life. If you can't measure its contribution to organisational goals and objectives then why do it? Clearly, it must be demonstrated that leadership capability is a fundamental prerequisite for current and future business success. Succession management is just one example whereby successful companies develop a pool of potential candidates ready to occupy future leadership roles when needed.

2. Senior leadership commitment

The senior leadership team must believe that leadership development is critical to organisational success. Not only must they believe this but they must be committed to achieving this and demonstrate such commitment through active involvement in the development initiative as and where appropriate. Such belief and commitment also requires a realistic appreciation of the time and resources needed to meet such an objective. It also requires a determination to continue the journey once started despite other distractions, both internal and external, that may require management focus from time-to-time. Clearly, this is no easy task – leadership development is a marathon not a sprint.

3. An accepted leadership model

This does not necessarily mean the latest and greatest research that you can find. The key to success is adopting a leadership model or framework that has the best chance of long-term survival. This requires a high degree of ownership and buy-in from a majority of internal stakeholders. An internally developed or externally introduced model can work – the difference rests in the degree of acceptance achieved.

4. Insight and motivation to change

At the individual level, one needs to gain awareness of their leadership strengths and development gaps and fully accept the challenge of leadership development. This is perhaps the single most difficult factor to consistently achieve. The reason for this is that it is largely a 'hidden' factor and can't be controlled as easily as most other factors (the second factor; 'senior leadership commitment' is equally vulnerable). You simply won't know whether you are getting real commitment or just compliance until you start to observe (and measure) behaviour change in the workplace. Many organisations have invested considerable time and money into company-wide programs with excellent attendance and state-of-the-art learning technology only to see very little reward for their effort. One of the main reasons is that many participants have not fully committed to the challenge of changing their current leadership behaviours. They might say they do, but actions speak louder than words.

5. A tailored approach

Companies achieve competitive advantage through differentiation. The same holds true when developing leaders. There's little to be gained in following the same approach as your competitors. No two companies are exactly alike; they have different values, cultures and objectives. Clearly, the same leadership development initiative will achieve different outcomes for each company. Not only does this hold true at the organisational level but it is equally relevant at the team and individual level. Off-the-shelf or 'generic' skill development delivers just that – a standard base-line capability common among most organisations at particular job levels. This may work at front-line leader level where many capabilities are common across organisations and even industries; however, it will fail to develop the unique capabilities to outperform competitors at middle to senior level leaders.

6. Highly relevant to the workplace

Contextual leadership models like Adair's (1983) for example, emphasise the challenges of leadership from a multi-dimensional perspective rather than a single focus on the leader in isolation. Useful models reflect the realities of other factors that influence leadership effectiveness in complex ways. To learn effectively, leaders need to apply and practice new techniques and concepts that are grounded in the reality of their workplace. Abstract theories and fictitious case studies only serve to further highlight the gap between leadership 'experts' and leadership practitioners.

7. Direct involvement of next level managers

Employees take notice when the boss takes notice. If leadership development attracts the attention and involvement of managers then team members begin to realise the importance of getting involved. Too often the responsibility for leadership development is relegated to the human resources and training departments where its relative importance and priority is adversely judged. Important projects are always top of mind for line managers – these get the focus, the resources and the participation from all. Getting next level managers directly involved in leadership development initiatives creates a sense of urgency and importance. Managers can get involved in a range of activities, from talking about upcoming training events, to coaching staff on-the-job and in some cases personally delivering the program.

8. Non-traditional approaches to 'training'

When asked how they learned to be a leader, very few managers recall the 'many leadership training programs they attended over the years'. Most recall the trial and error approach that resulted in many bruises, few true wins, but much learning. This is because leadership is an applied science. Rarely does one learn from the textbook but more so through practical application and reflection. Hence, leadership 'training' is less about formal training and more about highly relevant and well targeted learning opportunities. Ideally, these should be self-identified and directed in order to achieve maximum commitment, after all most people can relate to the training course they've been 'nominated' by their manager to attend. Less traditional approaches to learning leadership skills might include job rotation, expanded role responsibilities and project involvement.

9. Measurement and communication

'What gets measured gets done' is equally relevant to leadership development as it is in the wider business context. Behaviour change can be measured as can the achievement, or otherwise, of related business outcomes. The ability to measure and track development initiatives is key to communicating program outcomes and maintaining ongoing support for leadership development. Maintaining senior leadership, and employee, engagement in any leadership development initiative must be achieved in the same way that the organisation addresses other business critical projects. If key success factors one and two ('a clearly understood business case' and 'senior leadership commitment') are in place then this factor is easily addressed.

Where to now?

The leadership challenge is taking a new turn as the population in most western countries continues to age and demographic shifts highlight a changing workforce composition. The leadership practices that were relevant in the later half of the last century are failing to address the expectations of those now rising through the corporate ranks. Younger people are demanding a different approach to the way they are being led. And if they don't find it with their current employer then they're more likely these days to move elsewhere in search of it.

This creates an opportunity for progressive organisations to focus on leadership development that emphasises flexibility in style and application to meet changing business requirements. It requires greater involvement in setting the shape and direction of leadership development in organisations and a greater commitment to address leadership shortfalls at the individual and group level. In short, it means less of a focus on leadership models and frameworks and more of an emphasis on effective implementation to deliver lasting behaviour change.

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