

# Take the lead



What makes a good leader thrive and survive? MICHELLE GIBBINGS explains why effective leadership isn't a solo pursuit.

**T**he expectations on leaders today are greater than ever. This isn't surprising as the world is confronting such complex and rapid change that it's been called the 'fourth industrial revolution' by the World Economic Forum.

At the same time, employees are struggling to cope. The Deloitte 2014 *Human Capital Trends* study, which surveyed more than 2,500 companies in 90 countries around the world, found one of the biggest challenges to be the 'overwhelmed employee'.

Organisations need leaders who can thrive despite these challenges, and nurture the right environment to create and sustain effective teams who, in turn, can deliver outcomes.

## START FROM THE INSIDE OUT

It's much easier for a leader to sit back and identify how team members or colleagues need to change, rather than identify what may need to change in them. To effectively lead in a changing environment, leaders need to firstly understand themselves and then be

open to shifting their operating style and behaviour to adapt to the new environment. Their mindset will impact their willingness to do this.

Stanford academic, Professor Carol Dweck, found that people either have a fixed or a growth mindset. People who have a fixed mindset see intelligence as static – a fixed trait. Consequently, they want to always look smart and have all the answers. They believe that success is based on talent alone – not work. They ignore feedback and struggle to cope when things don't go to plan.

In contrast, people with a growth mindset believe that intelligence can be developed through effort. They are therefore more eager to embrace learning, take on challenges and persist, despite setbacks. They love learning, often display higher resilience, and are more willing to learn from others and receive feedback.

It is the growth mindset that helps the leader be best positioned to support their team through change. It creates a leadership approach where the leader is more:

- open to feedback and able to hear difficult messages from people at all hierarchical levels
- willing to reflect on situations and to examine how an event unfolded, so they can better understand their and other people's reactions
- comfortable trying new things, which is important as circumstances may require them to step up in a different way.

## BEWARE OF DEFAULT THINKING

It can be easy to fall into the trap of making decisions that are easy and popular, rather than difficult. By doing this, the leader effectively takes the path of least resistance.

In contrast, effective leaders recognise that complex and adaptive problems are not solved by the 'quick fix'. They know when they need to make deliberate decisions. Deliberate decisions are consciously made and means that the leader is acutely aware of any bias or limitations that may be impeding how they make the decision.

Many of the decisions we make every day are done habitually. This means they are taken with little thought and involve limited or no conscious processing. Academic researchers, Bas Verplanken (University of Bath) and Wendy Wood (Duke University), have confirmed this. They found that more than 40 per cent of the actions people performed each day weren't decisions, but habits.

In practice, what this means is that leaders will be making decisions relying on established patterns of cognitive processing. When they do this they are likely to ignore new pieces of information or data that doesn't fit with their expectations, assumptions or views of the world. For leaders who are facing situations and decisions that are new, such default patterns of thinking are dangerous.



### EXPAND YOUR VIEW

A key way to avoid or minimise the risk of default thinking is for leaders to consciously expand their field of view. This means that when they make decisions they don't just look for evidence to support their established ideas and opinions, but actively seek the alternate view that may challenge or disprove it. They also encourage constructive debate and welcome diverse views.

### KNOW YOUR MOMENTS OF TRUTH

A leader's brand is defined by the actions they take and how those actions are perceived by their colleagues, peers and team members. People notice what a leader does and doesn't do, particularly when there are variances between what a leader espouses as their leadership values and their actions.

Key defining moments, or leadership moments of truth for leaders include:

- what the leader pays attention to and prioritises
- how the leader reacts when things go wrong and when they are under pressure
- what they say and don't say, and what they do and don't do
- how they allocate resources and rewards, and recruit and promote.

How a person treats someone else shouldn't be determined by hierarchical position. Effective leaders act with integrity and build collaborative partnerships with the people

around them. They understand that organisational dynamics are different today (and into the future) and that to be successful it is less about hierarchy and more about building constructive networks.

Effective leaders are also conscious that hierarchy quickly changes. This means that who they work with and need to rely on to back an idea changes constantly. Consequently, they take a long-term view of relationships. A leader who ignores and mistreats people who are currently in less powerful or important positions does so at their longer-term peril.

### EMBRACE INFLUENCE AS A TEAM PURSUIT

Influence isn't just a skill for the leader. It is a skill that people at all hierarchical levels need.

This is because when team members fail or find it hard to build constructive relationships and negotiate and communicate successfully, it is the leader who has to step in. The more the leader is required to intervene, remove roadblocks and arbitrate decisions, the less time they have for other activities.

As it stands, organisational productivity is a constant challenge. In fact, a 2012 McKinsey Global Institute report found the average office works spends 61 per cent of their working week writing emails, searching for information and communicating internally. While employees often

cite the amount of time they spend in unproductive meetings as a key concern.

Consequently, leaders want to embrace what will enhance the team's collective productivity.

If a leader wants to get more traction and make faster progress, they need each team member operating optimally. It's almost impossible to achieve this if team members can't influence stakeholders and how decisions are made.

Team members need to be equipped to build sustainable relationships and create coalitions of support for ideas and programs of work. They also need to be able to communicate with impact, and negotiate wisely.

### STEP UP AND LEAD

Lastly, effective leaders are curious, open to change and are continuously improving themselves. They also don't abdicate their responsibility. They know the role they need to play. They don't delegate it to others, whilst accepting they can't do it alone. If leaders want to accelerate their progress in complex environments, they embrace their role in the change and empower those around them to act. They step up and lead. **SF**

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