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Leading in the Workplace

Abstract

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Leadership is a complex and contested subject. But there is no doubt that the consequences of modernity throw up unprecedented challenges that beg better understanding of its nature in organizations.

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Comments

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Leading in the Workplace

By Olivier Serrat

Introduction

Theories of leadership are divided: some underscore the primacy of personal qualities; others stress that systems are all-important. Both interpretations are correct: a larger pool of leaders is desirable all the time (and superleaders are necessary on occasion) but its development must be part of systemic invigoration of leadership in organizations.

Leadership is a complex and contested subject. But there is no doubt that the consequences of modernity throw up unprecedented challenges that beg better understanding of its nature in organizations.

More and more, contemporary discussions of leadership in organizations run thus:

Leadership is the key that unlocks (or blocks) performance and change. It is a social process—something that moves people. It is not what leaders do: it is what springs from purposeful relationships. Leadership does not depend on one person but on how groups act together to make collective sense of the situations they confront. From this perspective, leadership in organizations is the process by which individual and team contributions to a shared cause increase (at least) on a par with job-related psychological well-being.

Source: Author.



Early Models of Leadership

Indeed. These days, leadership is more and more defined as the means of influence by which a person enlists the help of others to accomplish tasks of common interest. Of course, this definition has not always held and the literature continues to frustrate: until about 20 years ago, the images associated with leadership were rooted in conflict, that is, moments of crisis or decision when the actions of an individual are pivotal.

Early models of leadership—usually Western and borrowed from the military—were wont to examine the circumstances in which leaders emerge, and then search for psychological traits. The definite, often heroic endowments they identified typically embraced vision, ideological orientation, charisma, physical vitality and stamina, courage and resolution, intelligence and action-oriented judgment, decisiveness, self-confidence, assertiveness, a need for achievement, eagerness to accept responsibility, task competence, capacity to motivate people, understanding of followers and their needs, skill in dealing with people, trustworthiness, and adaptability.¹

¹ Only quite recently—that is, in the last 10 years—has attention been paid to social distance. What characterizes

The archetypal qualities desired from leaders are undoubtedly opportune in dire circumstances. However, “old paradigm” trait approaches² and notions of situational,³ contingency,⁴ transactional,⁵ and even transformational⁶ leadership—all of which smack of command and control more or less overtly—cannot serve the miscellany of organizations that need leadership in the workplace in the 21st century. Certainly, all over the world, “ordinary” people work with remarkable success in extraordinarily challenging circumstances yet do not advertise superhuman characteristics in their leadership styles.

No institution can possibly survive if it needs geniuses or supermen to manage it. It must be organized in such a way as to be able to get along under a leadership composed of average human beings.

—Peter Drucker

The New Context for Leadership in the Public Sector

The challenges that organizations face in their efforts to perform owe to the rapid spread and connectedness of production, communication, and technologies across the world, and attendant changes in perceptions, expectations, opportunities, requirements, and workforces. In response, from the early 1990s, public sector organizations worldwide launched reforms inspired by President Clinton’s National Partnership for Reinventing Government, introduced in 1993.⁷ They continue unabated to this day.

Leading Change in the Public Sector,⁸ released by the Chartered Management Institute in 2003, gave a reality check on the pressures from public reform agendas in the United Kingdom that is quite suggestive of what is still being experienced there as elsewhere.⁹ Importantly, the research project also presented a sober assessment of what attributes and skills the survey respondents desired from their leaders and saw demonstrated. Table 1 reveals a clear perceived cultural shift in terms of the (then) new focus on delivery and working through partnerships. But Table 2 makes clear that resources and manpower levels were the greatest hindrance on reform. Clarity of vision was placed firmly at the top of the list of desired leadership attributes shown in Table

distant leaders, typically active in politics or the military, is usually quite different from what we identify in the nearby leaders we contact regularly. The latter are frequently perceived as intelligent, original, expert, dynamic, sociable, open, and considerate, for example. This distinction is crucial if we are to realize what is required in “normal” walks of life.

² Thankfully, perhaps, the seemingly innumerable traits that leaders are thought to exhibit (admitting also differences by sector) have since been pared into five dispositions: (i) self-confidence, (ii) empathy, (iii) ambition, (iv) curiosity, and (v) self-control. Many organizations still find uses for psychometric assessments inspired by trait approaches, for instance, by means of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, even though critiques suggest that such tests construct rather than discover traits, and might encourage surreptitious subordination of individuals to the professed needs of an organization.

³ Situational approaches underscore the context in which leadership is exercised and emphasize that what is needed differs from situation to situation. At one extreme, proponents argue that context determines everything. At the other, they suggest that leaders are able to work in different ways depending on the state of affairs, i.e., adapt their style and patterns of behavior to suit circumstances based on (i) their position power, (ii) the structure of the task, and (iii) their relationship with followers. At heart, both interpretations belittle somewhat the role of followers, who are shepherded into more or less learned subordinate acceptance through a decision process that can range from autocratic to democratic. Under the directive leadership style, leaders take decisions for others and expect instructions to be followed. Under the participative leadership style, leaders share decision making with others and may encourage them to “buy into” the task, emphasizing the achievement of concrete objectives.

⁴ Contingency approaches are skeptical that a leader can operate successfully in radically different situations. They suggest that leadership should change when the context changes or that the leader should change the context to ensure that his or her leadership style remains appropriate.

⁵ Transactional approaches involve trading. They recognize what employees seek from work. They design incentives to accomplish a predetermined goal, make promises, and exchange rewards for aligned efforts. Power is given to the leader to correct and train subordinates when outcomes are not those desired. Transactional leaders are more common than other types of leaders.

⁶ Transformational approaches are a variant of transactional approaches—some see them as a polar opposite—that aim to raise levels of awareness about the significance and value of designated outcomes and arrange ways to reach them, beyond self-interest, for the sake of the organization. Proponents claim that, unlike transactional approaches, transformational approaches are not based on “give and take” relationships but on the ability of leaders to redesign perceptions and values and change the expectations and aspirations of employees. The four elements of transformational leadership are (i) individual consideration (listening and attending to needs), (ii) intellectual stimulation (sharing cutting-edge information), (iii) inspirational motivation (framing a vision that appeals), and (iv) idealized influence (modeling the attitudes and behaviors one wants to see in others).

⁷ The mission was to create a government that “works better, costs less, and gets results Americans care about.”

⁸ Karen Charlesworth, Petra Cook, and Gene Crozier. 2003. *Leading Change in the Public Sector: Making the Difference*. Chartered Management Institute.

⁹ The research project surveyed almost 1,900 public sector managers—mostly at middle and junior level—in central government, local government, health, education, the armed forces, the fire service, and the police.

3, followed by integrity and sound judgment. Yet, the survey respondents reported that the top three qualities their most senior management team demonstrated instead were those of being knowledgeable, strategic, and committed to people. Table 4 reports that the three top desired public leadership skills were communication, engaging employees with a vision of the organization, and creating an enabling culture. But the gap was considerable in all three instances, notably regarding the third.

Table 1: Perceived Change in Culture and Values (percent, net change over past 3 years)

Base: 1,890 respondents	All	Central Government	Local Government	Health	Education	Forces
Focus on delivery targets	+87	+85	+93	+88	+83	+79
Forming relationships with strategic partners	+77	+76	+87	+75	+75	+64
Accountability	+72	+64	+68	+78	+70	+78
Responsiveness to clients	+64	+72	+75	+72	+62	+40
Working for the public good	+53	+58	+64	+59	+35	+42
Public involvement in service design and delivery	+51	+43	+73	+45	+65	+37
Improved client satisfaction	+50	+55	+58	+54	+49	+33
Ethics and integrity	+39	+34	+35	+37	+20	+56
Influence and involvement of elected authority members	+27	+19	+43	+30	+18	+8
Employee satisfaction and motivation	-3	-2	-8	+2	-15	+10

Source: Karen Charlesworth, Petra Cook, and Gene Crozier. 2003. *Leading Change in the Public Sector: Making the Difference*. Chartered Management Institute.

Table 2: Greatest Challenges Currently Facing Public Sector Managers (percent)

Base: 1,890 respondents	All	Central Government	Local Government	Health	Education	Forces
Resources and manpower levels	63	55	64	64	51	79
Work-life balance	43	45	40	42	47	51
Increased job responsibilities	40	37	36	44	41	43
Outcomes rather than inputs focus	35	38	39	35	30	27
Statutory inspection regimes	28	11	36	24	46	16
Level of support from above	23	25	20	23	24	24
Career uncertainty	21	30	18	24	16	22
Managing innovation and creativity	18	21	20	20	16	14
Personal growth and development	14	21	8	15	13	15

Base: 1,890 respondents	All	Central Government	Local Government	Health	Education	Forces
Delivering services online	9	14	13	4	8	4

Source: Karen Charlesworth, Petra Cook, and Gene Crozier. 2003. *Leading Change in the Public Sector: Making the Difference*. Chartered Management Institute.

Table 3: Key Leadership Attributes Desired and Demonstrated at Different Organizational Levels (percent)

Base: 1,890 respondents	Desired Attributes of Public Sector Leaders	Demonstrated by Own Most Senior Management Team	Demonstrated by Own Line Manager
Clarity of vision	66	35	28
Integrity	52	34	39
Sound judgment	50	25	33
Commitment to people development	49	36	39
Strategic	46	40	23
Decisiveness	39	29	31
Strong values	26	26	26
Knowledgeable	25	44	41
Creative and innovative	20	14	15
Inspiration	18	8	10
Energy	14	23	27
Passion	9	10	10
Resilience	9	24	21
Humility	6	4	11

Source: Karen Charlesworth, Petra Cook, and Gene Crozier. 2003. *Leading Change in the Public Sector: Making the Difference*. Chartered Management Institute.

Table 4: Key Skills that Public Sector Leaders Should Possess

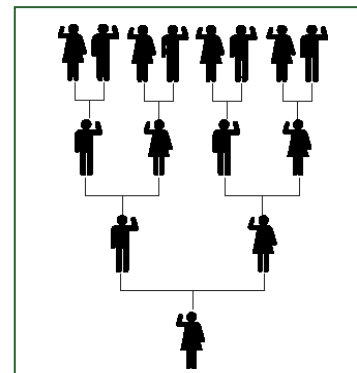
Base: 1,890 respondents	Desired Skills of Public Sector Leaders	Demonstrated by Own Most Senior Management Team	Demonstrated by Own Line Manager
Communication, including listening, skills	63	35	51
Engaging employees with the vision of the organization	62	35	31
Creating an enabling culture	60	27	34
Formulating and implementing strategy	48	44	30
Working effectively in partnership with the wider community	48	34	22
Leading change initiatives	43	36	36
Team building	31	21	40
Developing customer service strategy	24	31	22
Developing strong political relationships	23	33	20
Leading the innovation process	20	14	16
Exploiting the potential of new technologies	18	23	18
Managing contracts and procurement projects	6	23	16

Source: Karen Charlesworth, Petra Cook, and Gene Crozier. 2003. *Leading Change in the Public Sector: Making the Difference*. Chartered Management Institute.

Where To From There?

Recent developments in theory and practice have emphasized the growing complexity of leadership. Organizations are not machines and should not be treated as such. Since they are communities (of communities), we should want them to share the flexible, resilient, and adaptive attributes that characterize living systems. Learning organizations,¹⁰ much as living systems, are able to self-organize, sustain themselves, and move toward greater complexity and order when needed. They can respond intelligently to the imperatives of change without awaiting directives from the outside.

Despite the abundance of trust, however, the learning organization is not necessarily a comfortable place for conventional leaders: much of the power resides at the edges of these organizations, and imposed authority (even when subtly disguised) no longer really works—rather, it must be earned. A learning culture is born of beliefs, values, and principles that are shared by people who are committed to one another and to a common goal.¹¹ Therefore, running it requires a powerful theory: many suggest that this should be founded on questions, ideas, tests, and reflections in a wheel of learning.



¹⁰ *Learning for Change in ADB* broadly defines a learning organization as a collective undertaking, rooted in action, that builds and improves its own practice by consciously and continually devising and developing the means to draw learning from its own (and others') experience. See ADB. 2009. *Learning for Change in ADB*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/documents/books/learning-for-change/default.asp

¹¹ Such organizations might more appropriately be envisioned as communities of commitment, and certainly not as organizations of command and control.

Still, keeping the wheel of learning in motion—without it stalling for too long in one quadrant—is no easy matter. In 21st century organizations, certainly in the public sector, that and not much else may then be considered to be the primary task of a leader and his community of servant-leaders.¹² Each will find different ways of carrying it out, based on the mission of the organization, the distinctive context in which it operates, and the leadership attributes and skills that these demand—preferably to foster vision, give constant encouragement, and put on view personal examples. But all will ensure as they do so that the constituent members of the organization become and remain “change agile.”

The leader is best when people are hardly aware of his existence, not so good when people praise his government, less good when people stand in fear, worst when people are contemptuous. Fail to honor people and they will fail to honor you. But of a good leader who speaks little when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, the people say: “We did it ourselves.”
—Lao Tzu

In an uncertain world, high-performance organizations will be those that continuously renew, reinvent, and reinvigorate themselves.¹³ To these intents, they will wisely identify, engage, and develop individuals who possess the “learning habit” and delight in the unknown. They will invest immensely in them and trust them in equal proportions. Leadership will be collective, irrespective of hierarchical position or authority: true leaders will be those who build the organization and its capabilities.

Table 5: Toward Systemic Invigoration of Leadership

From	To
Self-isolating Individual Leaders	Self-supporting Leadership Teams
Individual Leaders	Leadership Institutions
Cult Control	Cultural Coherence
Rules	Principles
Naiveté	Complexity
Similarity	Diversity
Private Interest	Public Service
Inherited Traits and Acquired Skills	Developed Will
Win–lose Arguments	Win–win Negotiations

Source: Developed from Cabinet Office. 2001. *Strengthening Leadership in the Public Sector*. HMSO: London.

¹² Servant-leaders are seen as humble stewards of their organization’s resources. Servant leadership is a philosophy and practice of leadership, coined and defined by Robert Greenleaf. The general concept is ancient, with roots in China (Lao Tzu) and India (Chanakya). Servant-leaders, said Greenleaf, constantly inquire whether the highest priority needs of others are being served. Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants?

¹³ Inevitably, heeding Peter Drucker, each will recurrently ask itself: What is our mission? Who are our clients? What do our clients value? What are our results? What is our plan? These five simple—yet complex and compelling—questions are as essential and relevant today as they were yesterday and will be tomorrow.

Further Reading

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For further information

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Asian Development Bank

ADB's vision is an Asia and Pacific region free of poverty. Its mission is to help its developing member countries substantially reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of their people. Despite the region's many successes, it remains home to two thirds of the world's poor: 1.8 billion people who live on less than \$2 a day, with 903 million struggling on less than \$1.25 a day. ADB is committed to reducing poverty through inclusive economic growth, environmentally sustainable growth, and regional integration.

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