

Stepping up



Bob Hughes

In the first of a regular series, CEO of the Forton Group Bob Hughes gives us his insight into high performance leadership

There's said to be a new book written on leadership every seven minutes, which suggests it's both important and complex. In this series, I'll be looking at changing definitions of leadership and outline a well-researched leadership model that supports people to be better leaders.

Leadership isn't just about hierarchy, position, or status, it's about success. People taking ownership and responsibility. And if you do manage people or you are providing thought leadership, then this model will help you be more successful. It will support your team to achieve more too. The people who rely upon your good work will benefit and your organisation will be more successful.

In the middle of the last century, what we needed from our leaders was stability and efficiency. Organisations that were run well, with good continuity, efficient processes and reliability, prospered. The pace of change was slow and business models were relatively simple.

Organisations had the luxury of time to analyse what they were doing and make incremental change, often trialled through pilots before scaling up. Many were building on the successful models of automation and 'assembly-line'

processes. They were able to grow through 'time and motion' studies.

The approach to leadership in this generation is analogous to what many people see as the management side of the 'management versus leadership' debate; doing things right rather than doing the right things.

Leadership was often autocratic and commands were passed down. The managers in the hierarchy usually ran their teams in the same way as the company was run: the manager clearly in charge, and people weren't required to be creative - they delivered and followed orders. You would be deferential to the people above you in the hierarchy and dictatorial to the people below you.

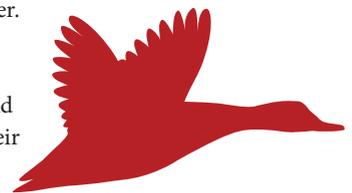
In that environment it was usually a recipe for success. But the pace of change increased, complexity grew and the luxury of time became scarcer. This is, of course, a generalisation. There have always been great examples of good leadership in the way we would know it today and organisations that were more successful as a result.

In the latter half of the 20th century a new style of leadership began to emerge. In this phase, a single, all-action hero figure takes control and saves the day. We became familiar with the phrase of 'parachuting in' a new leader.

At times you felt they could fly on their own and their

cape meant the parachute was redundant.

Leadership books were littered with examples of how the chief executive had transformed organisation single-handedly. Case studies multiplied, extolling the virtues of firm leadership from the top. Those leaders became famous and much quoted; Googling 'Jack Welch quotes' returns around half a million responses. As Chairman and CEO of General Electric between 1981 and



2001, the company's value rose 4,000%. So inevitably people will look to these examples and try to copy them. I have no doubt that Mr Welch did a fine job. Equally you could argue that environmental changes contributed to the success of GE or that another person with a different style working in a more collegiate way may have had the same, or possibly better, impact.

I have no doubt that in some cases there were some great individual leaders who were more successful as a result of their style. However, there is enough evidence around to challenge this myth of strong leadership as the cause of success. The key message is 'correlation is not causation'.

We still read about companies poaching their new CEO because of that person's reputation elsewhere and paying huge sums of money to do this. Internally grown CEOs have a much better track record. And, if you look at the correlation between the charisma of the CEO and the success of the organisation there is no correlation. However, there is a direct correlation between charisma and the size of their pay package.

All of this shows how the world of work is changing radically. We can't stick to 20th century models of leadership; that too needs to change radically. Because as leaders, managers or business-owners, we will struggle to survive, let alone thrive.

We need people and organisations to be more creative, more adaptable, and to evolve more quickly than the competition. This won't happen with hierarchical, command and control structures. That worked when all we needed to know was how many widgets to make that day and commands could come down the line, but it's very different today.

There's a parallel with evolution here; Charles Darwin is often misquoted in talking about the survival of the fittest. What he actually said was 'It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the most responsive to change.'

So, organisations with a monoculture, rigid processes and well-tuned systems work extremely well until change happens. Diversity, creativity, entrepreneurial qualities and the occasional maverick may be more important. It's certainly true that you are less likely to have people challenge the status quo or come up with radically new ideas if there is a culture of conformity.

This is especially true when combined with a blame culture. When failure happens, as it inevitably will, if the organisational

invests time and money in blame rather than learning from failure, then people stop taking risks and organisations stagnate.

With that backdrop, we need to find new ways of leading.

Prof Harry Schroder, a psychology professor at Princeton University, was fascinated to understand why some organisations were able to cope with increasing complexity and rapid change better than others. He concluded that there are core skills common to organisations; regardless of professional or technical skills.

He found a series of 'high performance leadership behaviours' that are better indicators of success.

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Part of the elegance of this model is that applies to a chief executive of a global multinational and an individual managing no staff. This means it is widely applicable.

When leadership is about people taking responsibility and taking ownership wherever they are in the organisation, and about people creating success for themselves and the team, the organisation and indeed in society as well, then we find the high-performance model supports this well.

What I especially like about it is the understanding that we are never going to be great at all 12 behaviours. Most performance management systems have an implicit expectation that we should be excellent everywhere. That the way to achieve this is to focus on, and improve, our weaknesses.

This approach is fundamentally flawed. Not only is it impossible to be good at everything; it's also untrue to assume there is only one approach to successful leadership. Look at the diversity of approaches that different leaders take. No one would say that Winston Churchill and Gandhi shared the same style but equally no one could contest the huge successes that each brought in their own way.

The 12 behaviours fall into four clusters: Think, Involve, Inspire, Do. I'll be writing in more detail about each of the 12 behaviours every month, so here is a quick overview.

The **Think** cluster covers the qualities we use to gather information and make

decisions. How

broadly do we search for information when presented with a problem? How well do we create robust ideas, ideally tackling more than one problem? Finally, how flexible is our thinking? Do we have a plan B?

Involve is about getting other people on board; there's a great quote from one of my favourite shows, 'The West Wing' when the president seems not to be showing the leadership people expect. The Vice President says, 'You know what they call a leader with no followers? Just a guy taking a walk.' Involve is about skills that build empathy, getting teams to work well together and working one-to-one with people, coaching and mentoring them. (Plot spoiler - the president superbly outflanks his opponents and his poll ratings surge.)

Once we have explored great ideas and have a team around us, we need to **Inspire** them. People need confidence in themselves and the leader has a huge role to play here. The leader also has to project confidence to the outside world. Communication skills are key and the more subtle art of influencing comes into play here too.

Finally, for success to happen the team actually have to **Do** something. This cluster is about taking action. It's also about continuous improvement, reviewing what worked well, and what you might do differently order to improve. Ultimately, it's about the focus you place on stakeholders, customers, patients, or service users - whatever term works for you.

There are five levels at which each behaviour is assessed. The lowest is called negative; actions here are potentially causing damage to the organisation. The second level is just undeveloped; we don't notice anything. Level three adds value through the use of a behaviour and level four shows strength consistently and at a higher level, in a behaviour.

Finally, the more senior you are, and the greater leadership responsibility you have, then you need to be demonstrating more of the behaviours, and at higher levels.

That completes the overview of high-performing behaviours. In next month's article, I will go into detail about each of these behaviours and how you can take steps to develop your leadership. ♦

