

The art of flexible thinking



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In his regular series, Bob Hughes talks about the art – and necessity – of flexible thinking

I'm often asked the question 'are good leaders born or made?' Most people can lead well, especially when they receive the right training and development needed to get to that point. The way that one person leads will be radically different from the way another person leads.

We all build on the strengths we've got and lead from a combination of those strengths. Add to this our internal value set, and our choice of leadership style, which depends upon the context in which we find ourselves.

The formula for leadership success is simple: develop your leadership competencies; choose the right leadership style, and apply both to the situation in which you find yourself.

A few years ago I was working with a US computer company. We bought one of their brand-new machines and, just before Christmas, something went wrong with the operating system. The company flew two teams into the UK and set them off in competition with each other to solve the problem. The team that solved the problem quickest were offered the option to bring their families out and spend Christmas at the company's expense in the UK. Not surprisingly, a solution emerged, probably quicker than it otherwise would have done. The two teams very quickly worked through a number of different solutions until they picked the correct one – time pressure helped them quickly evaluate and discard options.

Quite often, when faced with a problem, especially an intractable one, we sit around

scratching our heads until, eventually, someone comes up with an idea. The risk is, we all leap on it and try and implement it. The problem is that, whilst it may be the first solution, it isn't necessarily the best.

The 'flexible thinking' behaviour is about looking at the problem from as many different angles as possible, then coming up with a range of equally plausible solutions and assessing them against each other. Only after this process does implementation happen.

'Be careful before rejecting any ideas. It can be useful to look back at ideas that have been rejected in the past and see, with hindsight, whether any of them might actually benefit the organisation.'

There are many techniques for brainstorming ideas and looking from different perspectives. Edward De Bono's 'six hats' concept is one of the most famous; and there are other, equally successful, ways you might approach this.

Start by thinking about the different stakeholders in your project and imagining what they would say. Get creative, what would an alien think about this? What would a child think? What would an engineer think?

The secret is to free up your brain from the traditional thinking channel that you have been in.

Another way of looking at this behaviour is to have a 'Plan B'.

Turkish Airlines, one of the fastest growing airlines in the world, started to use psychometrics when recruiting for cabin staff, around 10 years ago.

They analysed the factors they believed would be most important in the personality characteristics of those staff.

One of the key elements was flexible thinking: both the belief that there could be an alternative and the ability to craft those alternatives.

Having a 'Plan B' in the event of an aeroplane crisis is critical and one that we could all agree on!

When motor engineers were set the challenge of accelerating a 1½ ton vehicle from 0 to 60 mph in less than five seconds, they were stuck. It could be done, but the challenges to the internal combustion engine were huge.

When the same problem was given to hydraulics engineers, they created a process of capturing and storing energy in hydraulic fluids as a vehicle decelerated, and using the hydraulics to accelerate when needed. As an idea, it was unlikely to ever be commercially

viable, but it shows how a radically different approach might come up with an idea, on which you can build.

It helps if you can get a group of people together to co-create this range of ideas. Your role is not to defend your particular idea, but to see the positives in all the ideas. Keep an open mind.

A useful phrase here, when somebody comes up with an idea that you cannot instantly see as being valid, is to say 'What I like about that idea is...' because by the time you finish saying those words, there will be a nugget of something in their idea which you can latch onto and build upon.

Be careful before rejecting any ideas. It can be useful to look back at ideas that have been rejected in the past and see, with hindsight, whether any of them might actually benefit the organisation.

When you do have a number of different viable alternatives, be disciplined and rigorous in the way that you

assess them. Involve other people in the debate. Make sure you do a proper option appraisal. Create a process if necessary, looking at all the factors that would impact on the decision and weight them if necessary.

Map out the implications and impact of each solution on the organisation. Look at what contingency plans you might need to put in to manage any risks that emerge.

Try to be as logical, objective and analytical as possible. It's amazing how often we make a decision on some gut instinct, an emotional attachment to an idea, or a predetermined stance. We then selectively use the facts and logic in a way that justifies our decision that was arrived at in a subjective way.

'In our lives, the scale of the decisions we make may be different, but getting the right solution in order to create the right outcome can have a huge impact on the people who are reliant upon us.'

Think about the friendly arguments you've had in the past with friends, perhaps about your favourite sports team, your political party or favourite film star. However valid your argument, I imagine you didn't shift their view. So, watch out for your own bias coming in during the appraisal of the options.

As you are analysing and evaluating various solutions, be open to the possibility that the solution you eventually choose may be an amalgam of more than one.

Another possible outcome is that the idea that is rejected might have a completely different application. By involving a wide range of people with different perspectives, you are more likely to spot those and put them to use elsewhere.

An employee of 3M sang in a choir as a hobby. One evening, he was shuffling through the book, picking which song was next. He had used scraps of paper as bookmarks and they kept falling out. He then remembered a conversation with a colleague at work, who was complaining that his attempts to create a new adhesive were going badly – the glue wasn't sufficiently sticky to be useful. He instantly saw a

different application and the Post It note was invented.

And, like the software teams I opened this section with, get creative about the rewards and acknowledgements you give. When people see that the behaviour you are looking for is creating multiple solutions, assessing them, in order to create a viable option, then people will start to behave in this way.

Competitiveness and tribalism can be harnessed for good, though you need to be wary that they don't lead to entrenched thinking; or people defending their positions without heed to the bigger picture.

When you become familiar with, and adept at, creating solutions and analysing them, encourage this behaviour in others. Where there are opportunities to create teams to look at problems, make them as diverse as possible. Bring different skill sets, different perspectives, people of different ages and from different backgrounds. The broader the thinking involved in solving the problem, the more variety of solutions you are likely to create, which enhances the prospect of getting the best one.

There is a theory that it's more important to get the timing of the decision right than it is to get the decision right. Timing is believed to be a quality of strong leaders. There's certainly a place for speedy decisiveness in leadership, but it is overrated.

When Barack Obama was elected President of the United States, he was under pressure to start a bombing campaign. He said he wanted to reflect on the situation, and might take time before coming to a decision. He was criticised for being 'weak'. I argue that's exactly the kind of decision that you need to think long and hard about and I applaud him for saying that and avoiding such actions.

In our lives, the scale of the decisions we make may be different, but getting the right solution in order to create the right outcome can have a huge impact on the people who are reliant upon us.

Next time we'll start with the 'Involving Cluster' and explore the behaviour of 'Empathy'. ♦

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