

Grasping the concept



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Bob Hughes on concept formation,
gloom merchants and Swiss
watches



The good news about leadership is that there is an excellent body of evidence around what is required in today's complex and constantly changing world, and also that good behaviours can be learnt. Each month, I will be writing about one that should support you in your work. In this article, I cover one we call 'concept formation', which sits in the first cluster of behaviours, the 'thinking cluster'. Each of the 12 behaviours can be observed at five levels, and we'll look at the differences between those.

With this insight and, where possible, with feedback from others, we can adapt our behaviours to become more effective.

I currently sit as a non-executive director on the board of an organisation called *Engage for Success*. Our remit is to raise awareness of what makes people truly engaged with their work, those willing to go the extra mile, tap into discretionary effort. Think about the times when you've gone into one shop and felt they really care about you and then in the next shop you might as well not have existed. That's what engagement looks like. There's no magic bullet that will solve engagement in every organisation, but we found four factors that were common across engaged organisations, and a leader who was less command and control and more engaging, more coach like, was the most important of these.

One of my roles is to chair a steering group of consultants, academics, researchers and practitioners that is responsible for instigating new research and for finding new ways of spreading the message of engagement

to new audiences. I've been doing this for about four years and I've finally realised it's time to move on. So what caused me to have this revelation? I'm still very committed to the movement and I've still got creative input to offer. But then at one meeting I found myself saying a phrase that I thought I'd banished from my lexicon. One of my colleagues came up with an idea and I said 'we tried that once and it didn't work'.

Whilst I may have technically been correct, it really wasn't very helpful. Her idea wasn't exactly the same as mine, the people involved were different, the circumstances had changed, and time has moved on. So how could I know whether it would work or not?

When we find ourselves getting in the way of new ideas in this way, we are exhibiting a negative behaviour of concept formation. This also shows up with the naysayers, the doom and gloom merchants who trample on new ideas by pointing to all the things that would get in the way of that idea succeeding. Now, don't get me wrong, there's value in constructive criticism. When we plan the implementation of new ideas we need to

analyse, and carefully manage, as appropriate, the risks. But there's a big difference between that and the general rubbishing of ideas.

There's often an explanation for this. Sometimes it's the ego of the leader getting in the way – they think that as the boss they should have all the good ideas and get irritated when someone else in the team thinks of something they feel they 'should have thought of first'. The other common explanation is just a fear of change. For many of us the unfamiliar is also the uncomfortable and in order to protect ourselves from change we try and dismiss it.

We do so from a perspective of survival. The primary function of the brain is to protect us, to keep us alive. It sees that right now we are alive, concludes that the status quo is a safe place and hence it steps in to resist when anything threatens to change that status quo.

Of course in today's world of constant change and increasing complexity, our survival actually depends on creativity and innovation. The writer Dan Pink in his book *'A Whole New Mind'* talks about

three factors that mean we cannot carry on as we are and assume success will come. The first is automation – not only the automation of manual tasks – but increasingly the professional. For example, online conveyancing or other legal advice is increasingly commonplace, cutting back on the work of the solicitors.

The second is Asia, where highly qualified graduates command lower rates than those in the West for work such as computer programming and much else. The final factor is abundance. Shopping meccas sweeping across the West and indeed Asia too.

In order to survive, we need to create great ideas. This behaviour of concept formation is all about exactly that. You might think as you read this that some people are naturally creative and others aren't, so how is it possible to build this as a leadership behaviour? Well, like any of these, it takes practice and we will look at ways to improve in this article.

If all we do is rely upon our existing knowledge and solutions that have worked for us in the past, then we're not really demonstrating this behaviour. Indeed, Einstein's adage that doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results, as a definition of insanity, may be relevant.

We need to come up with good ideas, and when we are able to do that, whether it's options, solutions or a vision for the future, then we are starting to add real value through this behaviour. You can start by just brainstorming ideas with colleagues, or by analysing a problem's root causes. You might want to use SWOT analysis or other techniques. If circumstances dictate that you have to do come up with a solution very quickly, then take the time afterwards, perhaps with other colleagues, to analyse the problem and see what really caused it.

We can do this with good results based on our existing knowledge, looking at trends, understanding our business, through networking, through keeping up to date with new ideas and changing circumstances in our world. Whenever I'm coaching people, whether they just starting out in their profession or the right at the top, I always challenge them about their network. Some people find networking tough. It's hard to strike up a conversation with a complete stranger.

To really build this behaviour to a more strategic level though you need to do more and here are two ideas.

The first is to try and get inspiration from a completely unrelated field. The world that we know well, with its rules and procedures,

its ways of working and the mind-sets of the people within it, we call a paradigm. Most paradigms have a finite life; they serve us well to solve existing problems but there comes a time when a shift in that paradigm is needed; we need radically different ideas and new ways of thinking. The problem is that the people within that paradigm find it hard to view their world from a different perspective. Plus, they are invested in that paradigm; changing paradigms can mean we go back to zero and have to learn again. So there's no real incentive to change – other than the need to survive!

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One famous example is the Swiss watch industry. The digital watch was first invented by someone working in that industry, but none of their colleagues took it seriously. They made beautiful handcrafted, complexly engineered, timepieces and believed that is what people wanted. The Japanese picked up on the digital idea and it almost destroyed the Swiss watch industry, which eventually fought back with the Swatch brand.

So one way to build this behaviour is to mix with people outside of the field you are in and see how they go about things. It's surprising how much we have in common, and how familiar our problems are, when we dig a little deeper. This ties back in to the previous behaviour of searching for information – the more broadly we explore, the more potential we have the coming up

with a new and different approach.

Another way to create really powerful concepts with huge impact is to find an idea that can solve more than one problem. One example was work we did in a large organisation that had the classic problem we call 'silo mentality'. Different departments didn't speak to each other and certainly wouldn't implement an idea that had been invented elsewhere. There was also a problem with the managers having a default style of 'command and control'. Staff were becoming resentful at being managed in this way and also stopped thinking for themselves, because the boss told them what to do all the time.

We introduced a short training programme which equipped managers with some coaching skills that allowed them to operate, when appropriate, in more of an 'asking' style than a 'telling' style. At the same time, we encouraged managers to coach someone from a different department. This had the benefit of breaking down some of those barriers between departments, as well as creating better engagement, through more coach-like approach to leadership.

Next month we'll complete the thinking cluster and explore the behaviour of 'flexible thinking'. ♦

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