

Time for some leadership development?

Start with WTF...

By Andrew Wells¹. June 2018

Leadership development is a route to take if you want your successful people to be more successful.

Leadership development is used when a “culture change” is called for, or perhaps if leading is simply underrepresented in the way your organisation runs.

Enduringly successful organisations have distributed and embedded leadership attuned to their purpose and aims.

Whatever your business is, the depth, quality and effect of your organisation’s leadership is one of the most potent differentiators available to you as you pursue your goals. So, do you want to differentiate your business? Is that important? Or are you content to pass up the opportunity to do so?

To help you think through, explore and decide on what the aspirations for leadership in your business could or should be there are any number of models of what constitutes the foundation of good leadership or what makes good leaders. These lie on a distribution from the worthy to the downright flaky. A colleague or peer might recommend something to you. You might find one that catches your eye after a few clicks on a mouse. You can reach for textbook theses on leadership and leaders, call in academics and

consultants, or gen up on the characteristics of leaders of Shackleton’s ilk, or Churchill perhaps (John or Winston, take your pick), or any of the many notable business leaders current, recent or historic.

No matter how good it is though, adopting or buying in an inherited or proprietary “off-the-shelf” leadership model for your business will not deliver for you if your aim is to differentiate. It cannot. For those not content to be merely adequate, a bespoke, nuanced and more effective approach in leadership development is needed.



Time for some leadership development? You might need to start with WTF. Whisky tango foxtrot could be what many in your target audience will be thinking when you announce your programme. The perennial stumbling-block for leadership development interventions and on which culture change also founders is how to engage people to embrace ideas and process that challenge their world-view. Note: not how to break down resistance through attrition or shock tactics, but how to engage real people and then harvest and harness their enthusiasm. Offer them

¹ *Dr Andrew Wells is a management consultant and executive coach. He is a founder and the Managing Partner at One Point Three Limited. [OnePointThree.com] One Point Three Limited provides management consulting, business advice, executive coaching, and facilitation services for clients in industry, commerce, government, and the uniformed services..*

something that is not invented here? I don't think so.

Perhaps you think you should start with why? When they hear your message the right people in your organisation will flock to your cause, eager to come on the leadership journey with you, to own the vision you have for the business. For you, your vision will pass the "why wouldn't they want to work in a company like that?" test. Because you think so your vision must also surely pass the same test for them too...? Better, clearly defined leadership expectations for your managers and supervisors just need to be set out, taught and installed.

Done it before? Perhaps the colleague who recommended the approach you think you should take now has used it in a previous job, at a previous company, and it worked there. There is always going to be resistance, that's human nature, but given enough sponsorship from the top that can be overcome. You just need the right commitment from a powerful coalition... ..and the right pyrotechnics on the platform.



But there is a problem. This is personal. It is those in supervisory and managerial positions that we need to bring on board. People who have place and position. The shift in mind-set we want those people to buy-in to, to embrace enthusiastically, and to act upon is by definition going to be one that challenges their long held and cherished world-views. There are implied challenges too to their competence in what they do, and your trust in them.

Of course a few of your people will always enthusiastically line up for you. A few on the other side of the distribution, as

always, could even be openly antagonistic. The majority though will probably mostly be inclined to let it wash over them. Not because they are cynical, but because they are busy people with other things on their minds and a lot to do. They will come along when told to, of course, take part politely in the training and the workshops, and then go back to work to get on with their day jobs. Your programme might be more interesting this time, more fun, more memorable perhaps compared to other leadership training they may have had before in their careers. It might stick in their minds. Perhaps there is literally some theatre involved? It would be a very dour group of individuals that does not rise to good entertainment and an experience shared. And, at best, a slow process of change might begin...



I interviewed a client a few years ago, at the start of an advisory assignment. I recall remarking on the books on the shelf in his newly refurbished office. He had pretty much every popular title I was aware of about leaders, leadership and change in business organisations.

"Yes," he said. "I do see myself as a leader, and I see myself as a bit of an expert on change, actually."

An American with a successful career, then and now, he had been posted as a representative to a joint venture company by one of the partner organisations. In a senior role his brief included "to lead on the people side" of a two year organisational transformation programme.

"Change like this," he went on to say later in our conversation, describing how he saw his job, "it's like warfare."

“Warfare?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “In the first year it’s as close to combat as you can get. It’s brutal. Always is.”

Angst did seem to follow him around, come to think of it. He had a reputation for leaving a trail of damaged people behind him too, and it could not even generously be said that he developed many others as leaders during his tenure. But he had effect. Things were different when he was ready to move on, they always were.

Brutal? Yes, it can be done that way if you like.

Slow or brutal? You choose.



Neither. Let’s think about effect instead. There are some simple principles to adopt which can transform how we go about leadership development interventions in business organisations and the effect we get from leadership development on organisational culture.

Leadership development is a change process. A change process, any change process, is not a process of telling or selling. It is a buying process. We even talk of getting people to “buy-in”. The power in a buying process lies with the buyer not the seller, because the buyer is the decision maker. Obvious? Yes, when you stop and think about it. But this is also a factor far too often ignored or omitted in organisational change and in leadership development.

Generally the protagonists and sponsors for leadership development and organisational culture change are senior people in the organisation who have

some view of how they want things to be (one would hope!). Perhaps it is you who has been given the job of developing your organisation’s leaders. It is on your slop-chit because the powers that be put it there and mandated you to get the job done. You have the authority to push ahead. You get to choose what should be done, when and where and how and in which sequence with whom... ..you choose who the consultants will be and how the programme will be cascaded down through the organisation. But the mechanics of a buying process are such that it is not what the seniors in the hierarchy want that is the critical success factor. It is what people subordinate to them decide they are prepared to buy-in to that matters. For some individuals for whom control and relative authority in the hierarchy matters, this inversion of power can sometimes prove difficult to come to terms with and to work with. You might decide what you want, but “they” decide if you get it or not.

It is the buyers’ world-view that must be respected foremost in a buying process. The added complication in leadership development is that it is this very world-view which we are seeking to change through the very thing we want people to buy-in to and embrace.



A buying process, any and every buying process, has three moments of truth. In leadership development one moment of truth is when an individual suspends his or her disbelief about the need for change and tries out a different idea, or way of thinking, or behaviour. Note: the individual does not have to believe in that idea straightaway. The first step needed is only that participants suspend their disbelief about what you are asking them to do differently. That is the best

you can hope to get to begin with, and it is the first moment of truth: getting that suspension of disbelief to happen well enough and long enough for participants to put an idea into action, properly give it a go, and actually try to make it work.

The second moment of truth occurs when an individual takes an idea or way of working back to her or his workplace and tries it out. At that moment the different way of working, or thinking or behaving, of leading must deliver on its promise. That promise is not the promise you make for the leadership idea, or the vision you want it to deliver, but the promise the individual assumes comes with it. If the change you ask your people to adopt does not deliver on the promises they assume and that they want then momentum for real change will peter out very quickly, and before your development process has had chance to get going. You will have plenty to show by way of the efforts you have made for your programme, perhaps, but little in the way of effect.

When a promise has been kept though, people will pass the message on. They will start to recommend the new behaviours, attitudes and ways of leading to others, and encourage others around them to do as they now do. This effect can be nurtured and encouraged and used to start a movement. Movements can cascade very quickly. Here we have the third moment of truth in the buying process: when other people promote the new idea to those around them without your direct involvement in the interaction. Change does not have to be slow. Not at all.

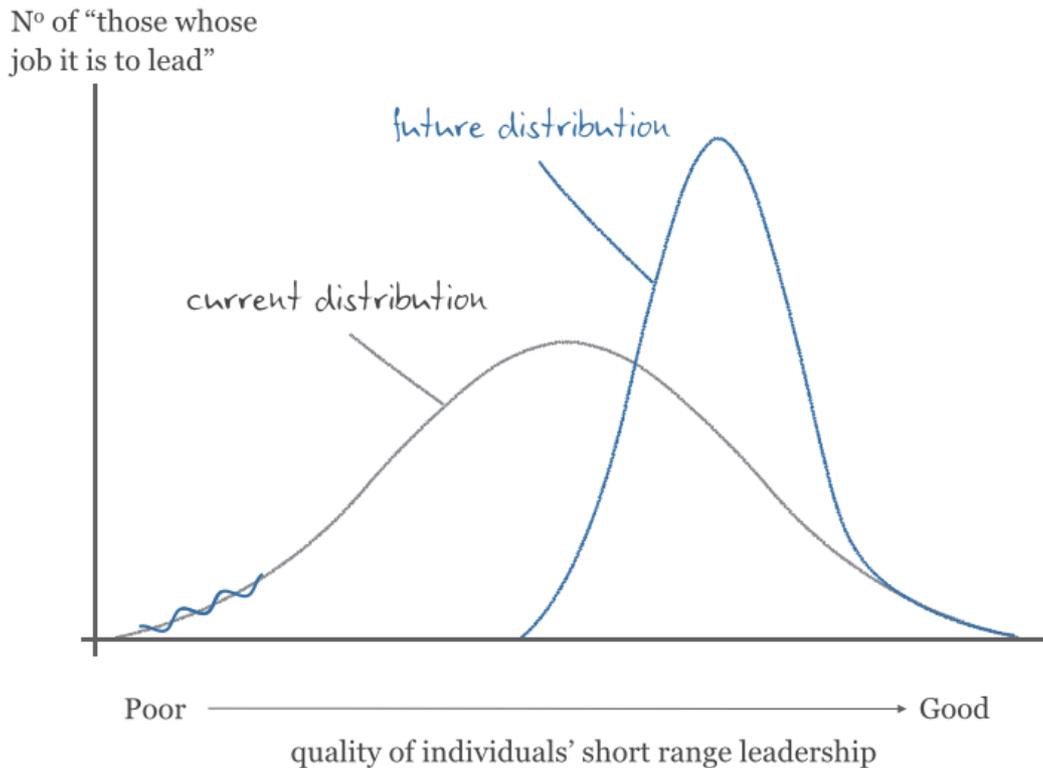
Work your development process around those three moments of truth. Push your thinking, engage with your people and colleagues. Listen to them and work

through what those moments really mean in the unique scenario of your business. Beware “confirmation bias” that we sentient inevitably suffer with. Assumption can kill a buying process, and too often it dogs our proper understanding of how others really think and feel about the proposition we want them to embrace and how we should best respond. Spend some serious effort on how to get those three moments of truth to work for you. This is an effort which, done well, will pay dividends... ..and it speeds things up.



Leadership in business organisations is not a simple factor that is either switched on or switched off. There will already be a distribution of leadership qualities across the cohort “whose job it is to lead” in your company. This is illustrated schematically in the exhibit at the top of the next page, page 5. The purpose of “leadership development” is to narrow the distribution of leadership quality and shift it to the right. The shift is both palpable and measurable.

Those “whose job it is to lead” are all those in positions of authority: from first level supervisor to Managing Director. In any business organisation’s hierarchy this cohort is called upon (and paid!) to do three essential tasks in the administration of the business: to manage, to direct, and to lead. As an individual moves up the organisation the balance between managing and directing changes, with those at the top of the shop doing more of the directing and less of the managing and those in the middle ranks managing much more than directing. Beware though the habitual confusion between directing and leading. Everyone in this cohort has, as part of his or her job, the requirement to lead.



The intuitive reader will spot a number of challenges that exist in this picture of distributed leadership quality when it comes to setting about in practice how to get the distribution to shift to the right to take on a managed shape. In particular, the process in a leadership development intervention is to take “those whose job it is to lead” on a journey of self-discovery and improvement: to tell them a story about leadership to stretch their ken and for them to buy-in and act on it. In this process, on one hand you might turn to third party leadership models, lectures from celebrated leaders, master-classes from consultants or learned academics, theatre learning, leadership training, etc... all great ways of making inputs that give fresh perspective and push the thinking. But these are all by definition not-invented-here. On the other hand, co-inventing your leadership solution is highly engaging and ideal tactically for getting buy-in... But will that take people anywhere much beyond their ken?

Ideally , we need both a model of leadership that our participants can relate to and will embrace, one that is within the bounds of their world-view, and an model of leadership that shifts their thinking, moves them, and transforms behaviours, one that changes their world-view.

In a commonly experienced approach for many in working life, a simplistic protagonist will assert his or her point of view and will push to get that view carried. He or she will politick to get those around him or her to capitulate to his vision, her way of doing leadership development, and insist that others, who may be legitimately concerned or reticent or have a different point of view, go along with it. In effect, they go to war: either brutally, by subterfuge, or by slow attrition. Sponsor the programme hard enough, drive change from the top thorough the organisation, demand alignment to (my!) corporate way...

It is doubtful that any real leadership is being shown in this type of approach.

The dilemma can be resolved though, sequentially through a two stage process. By resolving the dilemma properly rather than riding rough-shod over it, we can deliver a result that brings together both ready engagement by participants and genuine stretch through the acceptance of new ideas. This will result in a much more effective and reliable outcome.

Before you start imposing a view on what you want “to lead” to mean in your organisation, you can find very clear guidance on what “to lead” does means in your organisation and in your own specific circumstances: ask those in your organisation whose job it is to lead. That should be the first stage in any leadership development intervention. If you have been going for some time, go out and ask it now anyway, and then ask it again every so often and from time to time.

It might at first seem counterintuitive to ask the opinion of the very cohort whom you are seeking to develop; but in fact it is not counterintuitive at all. Asking people what they believe “to lead” is, and should be, sends the message that you are setting out to respect those whose job it is to lead, that you understand and respect the distribution of power in the buying process, and that you are going to trust these people to be leaders. It gives you the opportunity to start building momentum together with your people, to land a message with them about what their jobs are really about, and what expectations you wish to place on them. It tells you where the audience for your narrative about leadership is starting from in terms of understanding what to be a leader means (and thus where you must start from with them too). It would let you know whether you are building on

a workable platform of knowledge, and what that platform is, or whether you have to build one from scratch through an educational process [insight which enables you to focus your efforts, time and resources effectively and efficiently]. It is also the single most engaging thing you can do. Ask the audience. Do not tell them. Do not dictate. Do not assume. Do not sell to them. Ask them.

In most organisations you should find that the managers and supervisors employed there generally will grasp the task and function of leadership very well. Intellectually that is. Their understanding of the essence of what leaders should do should be good enough to work with, as a starting point. That has certainly been my experience from over two decades of taking a two stage approach. Usually if those whose job it is to lead would do more of only what they already understand leadership to be about, then that in itself would make a meaningful and substantive difference to your business from the get go.

Ask them: then draw out and collate their answers. Do this and they will have then told you what “to lead” means to them. You will be in a position to build on the foundation of their world-view, a key element of the buying process. The immediate requirement on “those whose job it is to lead” will also be inarguable. This will not be the end-state you may ultimately be after, of course not, but it is an intermediate proposition you can put momentum into for real and immediate benefit. The first ask of your leadership programme then becomes: “please go out and do what you say ‘to lead’ means”. Rather than devising your ultimate goal and then seeking or demanding to get buy-in to achieve that goal, co-create the starting point, build momentum on that first. Then steer the movement you have

created in the direction your business needs it to go. Give your people credit, respect and trust them as the intelligent, experienced, aspiring people they are. Do it with them, not to them.



The job at the top of the shop, of the guiding minds in an organisation, has three essential themes: sense-making, story-telling and steering. You must strive to be good at all three of these things if you are to direct a business successfully. However, if you are so minded, you could try to make sense of how you want to change things without speaking to anyone else. You could tell your people what you think is a compelling story about the changes you want them to adopt, purely on transmit. But, there can be no change without momentum, and no steering without momentum. No change will happen in the way you want if you cannot steer it. Changing the leadership attributes of your organisation is not about intellectualising your way to a new way of working. It is about acting your way there. Momentum is the vital element in change, and momentum comes from engaged people taking action. They won't need to be told why leadership is important, they already know why. They might just need that drawing out of them, perhaps. They might also need to be reminded that "to lead" is part of their job description and then asked to do it.

Once you have got to this stage, take a look at what you can do to encourage, help and facilitate your leaders to lead. What you can do for them: how you reciprocate, and how you can get your reciprocation in early or first.

Co-creation and reciprocation. These are two of the most effective active

manoeuvres that you can use to engage your people.



What are "those whose job it is to lead" likely to say when you ask them? Commonly what they will say can be distilled into a few keynote ideas, such as in the example below. It is in the process of distilling and ordering your people's ideas into a hierarchy of themes that you have opportunity to start to engage with your people to create tangible links between where you want leadership in your organisation to go and where your people start from. It is also here that you can work with your people to reconcile and align their thinking with your industry's standards, if this applies.

I was engaged recently by a medium sized company on a leadership development intervention. I and my colleagues worked with those in manager/supervisor/leader positions at that company in a series of workshops. The outputs and conclusions the cohort derived about "to lead" is not at all an unusual output, which is why I share it here as an illustration.

Through a structured process, we asked groups of managers and supervisors to list verbs to describe what "to lead" is in the context of their organisation and their own roles, i.e. what "to lead" means we should do. We then asked people to prioritise those ideas and we collated the results. Participants concluded that "to lead" has four important themes:

- i. The way we set about interacting with others: i.e. we engage, we listen, we communicate.
- ii. The effect we seek to have: i.e. to inspire, to encourage, to motivate.

- iii. The standards to which we hold ourselves: i.e. we set the benchmark and the good examples.
- iv. The fact and way leaders get things to happen: i.e. improve, promote, develop, innovate, achieve, act, change, create, resolve, solve, help.

Our client was pretty pleased with this as a description of what “to lead” should mean in her organisation, and from there started to work with her people about how they could actually get those things to take root in the fabric of the company’s culture. She got a lot of buy-in.

For you, this is of course the sort of thing your people might say, not what they would say. It is what they do say that is important, and it is going through the process of finding that out which gives you the engagement you need.

Another client of mine with whom I shared this example recently told me that he found these four themes and the associated verbs compelling enough ideas as they are. He recognised also though that to use these ideas as shaped by someone else would be leaping to an answer and foisting it on his team.

“It is the exploration of ‘to lead’ with our people, from their perspective, that’s the essential bit of process to go through,” he commented to his senior managers.

He is right, on all counts.



There is a really useful framework here for how to represent and communicate what “to lead” means. A practical lens through which to assess how well your leaders lead, and a compass with which to steer their efforts.

Take the idea of “following procedures” as an example and apply a leadership perspective. Following procedures is a behavioural factor that has great consequence for safety in particular. Keeping people safe at work is an area close to my heart. Let’s imagine we have a situation where a team of employees act complacently, or (even with the best of intentions) work around the company’s procedures. If that is the case, that team cannot be described as inspired, encouraged and motivated to comply with the way the organisation wishes them to act. There is a failure of leadership effect. If those employees have lost sight of the procedures they should follow, or if they do not properly understand these, then there has been a failure in leadership interaction: of engaging, listening to, and communicating with them. If the procedures we expect people to work with are too onerous or labyrinthine, or presented in language and format that is difficult for them to understand, then there is a failure in leadership action. We have not listened, acted, developed, improved, innovated, changed, solved and we certainly have not helped them.



So far I have described the first stage of a leadership development pathway, one that lays better foundations for success, and starts delivering a desired effect immediately. The second stage of the pathway is to push the thinking and steer your leader cohort along a trajectory appropriate to your business needs and the direction you want them to go.

There is no one definition fits all for what leadership or to lead should mean in business. Whilst there might be some broadly common features, good leadership is situational. The style and

quality of leadership you adopt in your organisation needs to be uniquely attuned and evolving to suit the characteristics and demands of your business. The way “good” is nuanced in “good leadership” should be unique to every organisation, and unique to yours.

In the example above, my client was perfectly content to go with the picture painted by her staff. But you might say perhaps, for example, that “to care” and “to connect” are two factors which you would like to enshrine more firmly in the psyche of your leader cohort.

The lens used by Cavendish Nuclear, a Division of Babcock International Group, provides an illustration of the use both of the lens framework I mention here, and of “to care” and “to connect” as example ideals for leadership and wider organisational culture. The comments about people and leadership by the company’s Chief Executive, Simon Bowen, on the screen shot below taken from the company’s website in 2018, are ones which particularly resonate with the thesis of this article.

We Care / We Connect / We Trust



“At Cavendish Nuclear we are creating a diverse company sustainable for the long term. There’s no question in my mind, it starts and ends with people and leadership, it’s about human connection, engagement and caring for each other. We care, we connect, we trust - that for me has got to be at the heart of everything we do to drive performance. Now why wouldn’t you want to work in a company like that?” Simon Bowen, Chief Executive

The Cavendish tricolon “we care: we connect: we trust” was first developed through an intervention which made use of the exact principles and approach outlined in this article. It has stood the tests of time and management change.

Once we have made the transition from say “leadership is something my boss should dispense to me” to “leadership is part of my job”, we might then progress in sophistication from a competitive, silo’d form of leadership (I lead my team to win) to a connected form of leadership (I connect my team to others for mutual benefit), and then on further still to “connecting” leadership (I connect others because it benefits them, even when it has no direct bearing on me). With each step the organisation acquires greater collective strength and benefits; it and the people in it “grow”. If the quality of leadership in an organisation can be visualised on a scale in this way, then it can and should be given a trajectory. The trajectory you set for the function, character and quality of leadership in your organisation is for you to derive. Good leadership is always in evolution.

In the example I have given, the second stage of a leadership development pathway would be the time to introduce additional preferred factors that the Lead

Team want to enshrine in “the way we do things around here”. It is not at all onerous, for example, to ask your people to try out “to care” or “to connect”, or anything else for that matter, alongside the other factors they apply in the way they lead, if those are factors important to your business.



In this article I have described a two stage approach to interventions for accelerating and enshrining good leadership in business organisations. One that lands leadership effect from the start and establishes a better platform from which to move forward. The first stage, the foundational stage, is about co-creating leadership people can relate to and getting the momentum going. The next stage takes us further: to leadership that shifts our thinking, moves us, and transforms our behaviours.

Now, wouldn’t you want to work in a company that does that?

About this article

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