

# Leadership for the Next Few Years

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What advice would you give your friend for their leadership journey of the next few years?

This is my perspective.

There are some timeless leadership qualities - like courage, humility, service and integrity - and I would not give up on those.

But the question is what's different about 'now' and the next few years. There are new features in today's leadership landscape and they call for new leadership action.

The most relevant features are:

- The drive for economic recovery
- The expectations of stakeholders at work, at home and in the community
- The proliferation of web-based, knowledge-rich professional and social networks
- The advances in understanding the drivers of human learning and human performance at work

There may be more. But these are the ones that shape my perspective.

For me, they offer those of us interested in leadership and leadership development seven beacons of light for leadership in the next few years.

Here they are.

## Seven Beacons of Light

### Leadership is...

1. Still about Results
2. Only this time it's Personal
3. It's in the Hidden Value of Relationships
4. In...'What can we do for each other?'
5. In the Art of Conversation
6. In the Power to Learn
7. And Driven by Intrinsic Motivation

### 1. Leadership is still about Results

Good leadership has never been about results *at any price*. But if leaders stumble in achieving their objectives, they ultimately fail. That's why leadership is still about the ability to achieve results.

It's the right place to start. But it needs refining for the pressures and priorities of our time.

The ability to deliver financial results justifies itself in the present climate. But the leader's world is more demanding. Everyone wants you for something - customers, suppliers,

business partners, your boss, your team, your community, your family and other loved ones. You play a part in all their lives and understandably, they all want something from you.

In today's world, the needs of all our stakeholders feel more legitimate, reasonable and fair. The rise of corporate social responsibility has made our duty to society and the environment a statutory requirement and our duty of care to employees and their families more than a passing reference. Leaders are expected to respond to them all.

Leaders have to create value for their customer, their team, their boss, their family, their community and their professional network at the same time. It's not easy to get the balance right!

Here's a definition:

*Definition 1: Leadership is the ability to create and deliver value for all your stakeholders.*

Now, take the idea a little further. A good leader knows the people they lead face the same challenge. So, the definition should be extended:

*Definition 2: Leadership is the ability to help others create and deliver value for all their stakeholders*

In practice, leaders have to know how to help their team satisfy the expectations of their stakeholders. This is the 'servant leader's' definition of leadership. It starts with questions like these:

- *Who am I leading?*
- *Who are their stakeholders?*
- *What do those stakeholders expect from the people I lead?*
- *How will they measure our success?*

- *How can I help the people I lead exceed their stakeholders' expectations?*

Around each employee in your team, there is a web of stakeholder expectations. In today's world, leadership is about helping your team members ensure those expectations are met, as well as attending to your own.

This is the first 'beacon of light'. It illuminates the leader's first priority – to deliver results – by showing that you have a leadership duty to assist your team in meeting the expectations of all the stakeholders who are depending on them.

Successful leaders ask:

- *How am I helping my team serve their customers better?*
- *How am I helping them reduce their costs?*
- *How am I helping them add value to their professional network?*
- *How am I helping them get to their child's sports day?*
- *How am I helping them serve the community to which they belong?*

The first beacon of light illuminates the need for leaders to satisfy the rising expectations of all their own stakeholders and help their team do the same for all of theirs'.

## 2. Only this time it's **Personal**

Remember mass customisation? The corporate drive to make global products suit personal preferences?

It's the global coffee brand you can have just the way you want. It's the personalised laptop, TV schedule or holiday package.

Suppliers know the cost of customisation is outweighed by the long-term value of customer loyalty. Personalisation is a competitive advantage.

As consumers experience the delight of options and features that let them make it 'mine', employees are calling for work flexibility to suit who they are.

But, our question is about how the nature of leadership could be benefit from the advantages of mass customisation. New leadership models and theories abound. Good ones make strong global claims. But few of them say: 'If you want this to work well, you must personalise it by asking the people you lead how they want you to act.'

*Personalised* leadership? Yes, of course. That's what people expect these days.

There is a strong business argument for personalised leadership. Have you seen the research on employee engagement?

In public and private sector organisations, there is a causal link between employee engagement, customer satisfaction and stakeholder satisfaction. When employees are highly engaged customer retention, sales and profitability improve.

Research also shows that today, employees *want* to be engaged; that they *want* to add value in organisations that want to make a difference and that they value the employers and managers who notice and respond to them individually.

It supports the argument that personalised leadership is good for business.

Like global products that are personalised to engage us in our world as consumers, global leadership models and corporate

leadership competences need to be personalised to engage employees.

As this happens, leadership practices will become massively diverse. In the new era, there is a shift from singular leadership ideas in favour of a plurality of leadership practice - from a monolithic leadership culture in favour of a thoroughly cosmopolitan one.

To succeed, leaders will need more interpersonal flexibility and effectiveness than ever because now, leadership has to be personal.

### 3. It's in the hidden value of Relationships

More than ever before, we are immersed in freely available information, news, knowledge, expertise and entertainment via websites, blogs, tweets, TV, radio, books, magazines, podcasts and more. It's global and local, rich, fast, diverse and increasingly targeted to our individual interests and habits.

Bringing it all together is the recent surge in web-based, professional and social networking.

Faced with a novel question or a complex challenge, we combine what we already know with what we can find 'out there'. Our minds are not just in our heads, but in the network of our relationships. As Gregory Bateson said, the human brain is not bounded by the skull but immanent in the pathways of the mind that connect us with the world in which we live. Put simply, he said, 'mind is social'. And, wow, how that social, networked mind has grown!

At work you simply cannot see the fantastic, value-rich network of relationships around the people in your team. But it's there all right and it's an amazing resource for answering questions, solving problems and improving performance.

So, what does it mean for leadership?

It means the productivity, performance and potential of your team is far from limited to the experience, knowledge and skills they brought with them – it includes the hidden value of their rich network of relationships, too.

Professionally, networks of knowledge, expertise and proven solutions are a new source of competitive advantage.

Before long, we will be adding new questions at selection interviews:

- *Professionally, how well networked are you?*
- *What additional value can your network bring to this role?*
- *Describe a challenge you resolved successfully using the added value of your professional network?*

In future, the value in an employee's network of professional relationships will be a decisive factor in both job selection and performance.

As the networked world proliferates, leaders will be increasingly curious about the value of professional networks in their team. But will their teams be open to sharing that personally valuable resource?

As a source of expertise, professional networks are a source of power and influence. Sharing your network requires a balanced judgment between the value of collaboration and the value of 'what's in it for me'. And potentially, the greater the value of the network, the more the employee might expect in return for sharing it. In this world, the power dynamic between the leader and their team flattens out. In this world, leadership by command and control just doesn't work.

Leaders have to adjust. In knowledge-dependent organisations (and there are more and more of those), rich professional networks enable their team members to work independently with more autonomy. Networks increase the performance potential of teams willing to share the resource for a common goal.

There are two implications. First, leaders need to learn how to take advantage of the increasing value of those hidden networks of professional relationships to which their team members are connected. Second, leaders need to learn how to encourage their teams to openly share their networks with each other. And since you can't do that by relying on positional authority, leaders will have to learn how to earn respect and build trust on a much more equal footing.

This beacon of light brings the value of hidden relationships into the open and in so doing, it calls on leaders to learn more about how to leverage networks for better performance.

Just as important, the value in these networks makes the leader's power relationship with their team less hierarchical, emphasising the need for more sophisticated, collaborative leadership skills.

#### 4. Leadership is about... **'What can we do for each other?'**

Leadership was never as crude as 'What can you do for me?'

Nor was servant leadership ever meant to be as unbalanced as 'What can I do for you?' although I firmly believe good leadership starts with that question.

Today, leadership is more about 'What can we do for each other?' in

pursuit of a common good, higher purpose or shared vision.

In corporate organisations, the question is formally answered through the annual performance management cycle. But the spirit and quality of those objective-setting conversations varies considerably.

Leaders are caught between the corporate cascade of performance targets and the employee need for involvement, motivation and engagement.

Today, the employee's precious resources – their talent, discretionary effort, network of relationships etc – are more critical to achieving the common good than ever before.

For this reason, leadership has to become more *reciprocal* than ever.

When leaders see the links between employee engagement, discretionary effort, shared networks and team productivity, they will shift their leadership behaviour to embrace the principle behind the question, 'What can we do for each other?'

In today's world, there is a performance advantage in leadership behaviour based on reciprocity and collaboration in pursuit of a common goal.

That's why I think, 'What can we do for each other?' is the fourth beacon of light.

## 5. Leadership is in the... **Art of Conversation**

Everything we do is mediated through language.

Proposals, plans, ideas and presentations; messages, briefings, meetings and speeches; strategies, values, brands and annual reports –

all of them are expressed in words, phrases, sentences and stories.

There is a qualitative difference between the written word and the spoken word. Each has its place. But when it comes to the task of leadership, our ability to speak well, to capture the attention and connect with the hearts, minds and motivations of others, rests so much more on what we say and how we talk than on what we write down.

We can think of leaders who are great orators capable of capturing the attention of hundreds or thousands of people. There is a definite skill in that but it's a relatively small number of leaders who speak on such a large scale. The vast majority talk very, very frequently to small numbers of people and it's almost always a conversation, rarely a speech.

These conversations are pivotal moments. They can make or break an idea, they can build or erode a relationship and they can enhance or damage a reputation.

And yet, whoever trained you in the art of making a good conversation?

No one, probably.

It's remarkable. If there was ever something so obvious that we have failed to 'see', it has to be the ability to hold productive conversations.

So, where should we start?

Well, because conversations require the good use of words, phrases, sentences and so on, a helpful starting point is to recognise the missing skill as one of 'authorship'.

Leaders *author* their conversations and since they are dialogic by nature, authoring what you say has to be effective 'in the moment', at the time of speaking and meaningful in response to whatever else is being

said. It's not easy – but it's very important.

Leaders in corporate organisations have to be effective in a number of 'set piece' conversations:

#### **The 1 to 1**

- You with your boss
- You with your team

#### **The Team Meeting**

- You chairing as a team leader
- You attending as a team member

#### **The Presentation for Approval**

- You presenting plans and ideas
- You responding to plans and ideas

#### **The Unplanned Corridor Conversation**

- You with your boss
- You with your team

These are eight pivotal moments in which the leader's success depends on conversational excellence. And like everything else, conversational excellence can be developed.

My advice to leaders therefore is to become aware of their conversations, to notice what makes one 'good' and in particular, to appreciate their role as a practical author of conversations that connect, engage and motivate others to perform and succeed.

This beacon of light reveals a new dimension to leadership for the current age. In its broadest sense, 'leadership as authorship' tunes us in to the creative task of planned eloquence in everything we say and write. In a narrower sense, it illuminates the leader's role as a practical author of good quality, productive conversations.

So much hangs on them, I will be surprised if we do not see a rise in the value of conversational competence.

## **6. Leadership is in the... Power to Learn**

It is very compelling to read the Lominger research that points to 'learning agility' as the defining characteristic of high potential leaders.

They define it as the ability and willingness to learn from experience and conclude that effective and successful people are simply better learners.

We can easily deduce from this that if you want to succeed, you need to know how to learn. Or even, the greater your learning capability, the more successful you will be.

In today's fast moving, fast changing leadership world, with an abundance of information presented via all kinds of media, it certainly seems sensible that leaders should know how to adapt and change – by learning.

Although the idea of the learning organisation has been around for many years, leadership competences relating to learning capability have not been elevated to the same status as, for example, customer focus, strategic awareness and delivering results.

But maybe it should be?

Especially in the development of leaders in their early career so as to equip them with a skill they need for life.

Of all the additional research on learning capability, I am especially attracted to the work of Ruth Deakin Crick at Bristol University for the very reason that it teases out specific dimensions of learning capability that we can more easily translate into leadership competences.

Examples include, Critical Curiosity, Meaning Making and Learning Relationships.

With the chaotic welter of information impressions coming our way every day, leaders need both the discerning power to be selective and the learning power to be curious and critical. With the power to learn, leaders equip themselves to perform more effectively in a faster moving and more demanding world.

So, this beacon of light illuminates the leader's need to develop and use their learning power.

It also tells us that in leading others, one of the most helpful things leaders can do for their teams is to challenge and develop their critical curiosity, their meaning making and the quality of their learning relationships.

## 7. Leadership is about... **Intrinsic Motivation**

No matter how talented you are or what is expected of you, whatever motivates you will ultimately determine what you do, how hard you try and how far you succeed.

Such is the pervasive influence of intrinsic motivation.

It's the basic driver of human effort and the power that makes people 'go!'

Dan Pink has done the corporate world a great service by bringing the importance of intrinsic motivation to our attention.

For corporate performance everywhere, the reminder about intrinsic motivation is important because it is the essential driver of human learning, productivity, fulfilment and performance.

Everyone - leaders and teams at all levels - have ideas that excite them and goals they really want to achieve. In developed economies,

working life is a vehicle for realising these dreams.

The trick lies in discovering what they are, aligning them to the work that needs to be done and in ensuring they add value that other people want.

But if you think about it for a moment, intrinsic motivation has always been the source of better ideas, worthwhile improvements and better results.

Human achievements start with imagination, curiosity, experimentation, desire and the drive to see good things brought to fruition.

It's always been that way, it's just that we haven't yet consciously formalised it as part of 'the way we work'. But its time has now come.

There are two implications.

One, leaders need to know what truly motivates them professionally and make it as central as they can to the work they need to do. Their contribution will be more enriching for their organisation and more fulfilling for them.

Two, leaders need to work with their teams to assist them in discovering what intrinsically motivates them professionally and align those interests and aspirations to realistic and value-adding activities at work. It may sound like a hopeless utopian ideal - but many aspirations start off that way. There are many corporate advantages in making small, step-by-step adjustments to move in this direction.

Not least, it includes the potential for better job satisfaction, employee engagement, discretionary effort, productivity and performance.

It is also a remarkably good way of ameliorating the effects of work-related stress. A climate that

encourages employees to thrive and prosper doing work they enjoy is one of the main strategies for creating an environment that promotes wellbeing at work – and the rising cost of absence supports the business case for doing it for these reasons.

So, the seventh beacon of light illuminates the advantages of intrinsic motivation as a relatively untapped source of innovation, engagement, discretionary effort and improvement.

Successful and ambitious leaders will quickly learn how to discover it in others as well as in themselves and they will use every creative effort to align it effectively to the work that has to be done.

In the future, we will look back and stare with surprise at how long it took us to realise that employee performance at work is optimised when the chance to achieve a goal or fulfil an aspiration that really motivates them is given to each employee.

Human motivation – it's still the untapped source of corporate achievement.

But not for long.

## In Summary

I started with a question:

What advice would you give your friend for their leadership journey of the next few years?

And I've offered my perspective on the answer.

In short, I see 7 leadership nuances that are right for our time. Here they are:

## Leadership for the next few years is...

- Still about Results
- Only this time it's Personal
- It's in the Hidden Value of Relationships
- In... 'What can we do for each other?'
- In the Art of Conversation
- In the Power to Learn
- And Driven by Intrinsic Motivation

## The Implications for Leadership Development

I know there will be many readers of this article who work as leadership development practitioners.

I'm one of them, too and the question on our minds might well be:

- *How does this foretell the priorities for leadership development?*

My essay is a personal perspective – an outsider's view. Insiders will know the corporate leadership priorities shaping their own development agenda. So, what I've written won't be relevant as a general solution.

But selectively, some of the elements might be just what you need.

For this reason, the 7 items can be seen as 7 unique leadership skills or 7 distinctive leadership development modules.

Should any of them attract your attention, the next task is to define the skills as 'things that leaders *do*'.

Only then can they be turned into effective leadership development experiences or events.

## Leadership Development Program Design

In designing those development experiences, the learning objectives for each of the 7 skills would read something like this:

- How to... ensure value is delivered to all stakeholders
- How to... make your leadership personal
- How to... optimise the hidden value of networked relationships
- How to... lead by 'What can we do for each other?'
- How to... author highly productive conversations
- How to... develop and use your learning power
- How to... discover and align intrinsic motivation for better performance

Customised to focus on current issues, real people and actual relationships, such a program would be packed with performance-focused expertise that is absolutely relevant for leaders in the next few years.

### Invitation

I'd like to end with an invitation for you to comment and offer feedback on the ideas presented here.

I'm especially interested to find out if they resonate with other leaders and those involved in leadership development.

Please get in touch.

Thank you.

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### About the Author

Tim Coburn is the founder and director of Flourish, an independent consulting enterprise focused on the link between intrinsic motivation and performance at work, at school and in the community.

Before Flourish, Tim worked for 20 years with hundreds of leaders in four exceptional organisations: the BBC, Motorola, Rolls-Royce and Kenya Airways where he held senior, global roles in leadership development, talent management, OD and learning and development.

He is a Visiting Fellow at the International Centre for Talent Management at Nottingham Business School, a Non-Executive Director of Satellite Consultancy Ltd who specialise in 'learning power' and a consultant with Steve Mostyn Associates focused on the future of leadership. He is a Young Enterprise/Junior Achievement business volunteer in England and Africa and a Parent Governor at Appleby Primary School, Cumbria, England.

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