



# Practise what you preach

**Eddie Kilkelly** reveals the common gaps that arise in the professional development of management teams

**T**he transition from employee to management to leadership is challenging. Typically, there is an inverse relationship between the complexity of the role and level of responsibility and the degree of guidance and training provided.

New employees will undertake induction and job-related training to fire their knowledge, understanding and skills. Their performance and development will be guided by a manager and they are likely to have specific targets related to their job role. The manager of a location, department or project is likely to have management and financial

training. He will be assigned targets related to his team and he will be guided and managed by more senior executives. At the next level of seniority, managers are expected to become organisational leaders and there are fewer opportunities for formal training and guidance.

While a project manager can seek to emulate a defined approach to project management, such as PRINCE2, there is no one definitive approach to leadership. Leaders are expected to define and communicate the business strategy and operational targets, and must be responsible both for leading and managing their people and for their own personal and professional development, without a higher level of management to guide them. →

## *Leaders need context-related learning that focuses on specific leadership challenges*

### **The demands of modern management**

In addition to the level of responsibility and lack of formal guidance and training, senior managers must deliver results in a business environment that is more complex and demanding than at any previous point in history. They also need to anticipate and lead their business through constant change in global markets and supply chains, technological innovation, and investors or chief executives who demand rapid results.

Leading knowledge-based organisations brings additional challenges. In process-based, hierarchical organisations in the past, employees deferred to a leader's position within the hierarchy and his inferred authority.

In today's flatter organisational structures, leaders need to engage their employees and encourage them to buy into the strategy and the plan of action needed to deliver results. Leaders must balance being sufficiently independent to set the agenda and lead with authority with appreciating that they are also interdependent; they are only as good as their team.

Different leaders deal with these demands in different ways and this can be related to whether they have been externally recruited into a leadership role or promoted internally. Externally-recruited leaders are able to create a new persona in a new role in a new organisation, and their teams will accept and respond to that persona without preconceptions. Internally-promoted, on the other hand, candidates need to deal with the preconceptions of other senior managers and junior team members regarding their position and level of authority; some find that adjustment difficult.

In many cases, these leaders privately admit to a lack of confidence that can have its roots in a type of imposter syndrome, in which they question their right to be in that position in spite of decades of experience and proven capability.



## Helping managers to become strong leaders

Retaining key talent is a common problem in organisations today but if internally-promoted, capable people are not affirmed and supported as leaders – and it is easier to adopt that persona in a new organisation – they will be lost.

The diverse demands of leadership in modern organisations mean that no one training course can meet a leader's exact needs. Many leadership training courses cover concepts the manager will already have studied, such as teambuilding, motivation and communication; leaders therefore need context-related learning that focuses on specific leadership challenges. In addition, chief executives generally want to buy improved capability rather than training – hiring leaders externally rather than internally developing the leaders of tomorrow. Few leadership training schemes include follow-ups with line management, HR and the trainer and actionable objectives to monitor progress, and it is harder to demonstrate return on investment as it is not a simple matter of measuring improvements in knowledge, process or output.

For these reasons, professional development tends to be self-directed.

## Techniques that deliver results

There are techniques that leaders can adopt to help them become more effective. It is essential to rise above the daily operational business to look forward. In busy organisations it is difficult for leaders to make the time and space to think, so this should be prioritised within their diary and camouflaged from their own team and peers, as others are unlikely to respect time dedicated to 'thinking'. To avoid disturbance and distraction, the leader should create a fictitious meeting and keep changing the label and timing so others don't realise it is actually disguised thinking time.

Another good way for leaders to avoid disturbance and distraction is to leave their office and find somewhere else to go. To really challenge their thinking processes, they should take nothing with them except a blank piece of paper and a pen. This thinking time should be focused on the one challenge the leader wants to work through. It is a good idea to 'cleanse' the brain beforehand by reading a poem or an inspirational quotation or doing something else that completely switches the leader's thoughts from day-to-day business matters; thus they can approach the challenge with a mental, as well as a physical, blank page. It is essential to let go of detail, but not lose sight of it altogether.

In addition to thinking about the business, leaders need to think about themselves and their own continuing professional development. A better leader can generate better results but, as noted above, there are few really suitable training programmes in leadership. Of course, training courses can provide a simple overview of leadership skills and responsibilities and deliver a networking opportunity. However, the focus of a leader's CPD needs to be on where they individually feel weak; this could concern their ability to develop and communicate the strategy, vision and values of the business.

They also need to learn to delegate effectively. It is difficult to wear the two hats of leadership – controlling and directing the business on a daily operational level and determining where it needs to go next – at the same time. By making junior managers responsible for monitoring and delivering operational results, leaders can free up their time and energy to create the vision and lead the business.

What is essential here is that leaders continue to receive appropriate performance indicators to drive the strategy and confirm the organisation is on the right track, while also allowing them to act.

To help leaders develop those skills and abilities, coaching and mentoring is much more effective than off-the-shelf training. The direction and advice can be tailored to the leader's specific situation and delivered on an ongoing basis, when he needs further guidance. Many leaders feel isolated, unable to ask for guidance internally and with no rule book for the day-to-day decisions they need to make. Having a trusted advisor at end of the phone can be a powerful attribute. For example, a coach or mentor can be a critical friend when it comes to the tough decisions leaders need to make, when they cannot ask the advice of the chief executive or their peers in senior management. However, the use of



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## The difference between a leader and a manager

Perhaps the best tool a leader can have is resilience, to be able to deal with the inevitable challenges that arise. To build resilience, a leader needs to be able to change their mind set. Thoughts trigger emotions, which influence behaviour, but leaders can learn to better control their thoughts. This cognitive reframing requires the leader to become more aware of detrimental thought habits, to learn to challenge negative thoughts with rational thinking and then substitute those negative thoughts with positive and life-enhancing thoughts and beliefs. Some leaders feel that making positive affirmations sounds more new-age practice than management tool, but that is not the case as long as the leader is grounded in rational analysis and thought.

Leaders also need to exhibit the proactive

behaviours that helped them become a leader and, yet without a constant focus, they are often lost in the noise of the 'day job':

- leaders continue to 'sharpen the saw', looking for continuous improvement in themselves, the business strategy and others
- leaders proactively make the right, informed decisions to drive forward the business, their team and their own professional development
- leaders are inclusive and involve their team in the vision and the plan, yet decisive and knowing that ultimately the responsibility lies with them
- leaders rise above their day job and take the helicopter view on what comes next
- leaders lead as opposed to manage.

coaching and mentoring is comparatively low. In one organisation I know, there are more than 900 senior programme and project managers responsible for multi-million pound projects, yet to date only around 60 have taken advantage of a coaching or mentoring arrangement.

Leaders also need to look at wider development opportunities, through reading management and leadership texts, going along to leadership seminars or joining networks on the web. Trade shows can also provide a valuable opportunity to network with peers. In a leadership context, networking is not about hundreds of connections on a social media site; it is about making sure the leader has the right connections to create a powerful network for his own needs. To achieve that goal, leaders should plot out their network, including mentors and stakeholders, to recognise the value of the relationships they have and those they need to develop.

### Leadership is a journey, not a destination

Behaving like a leader is essential in order to generate respect from peers and juniors. Leaders also need to set the example for others to follow. Typically, a new employee is keen to impress and will work on adopting the right image and behaviour. With the additional pressure of management responsibilities, it is easy to tire and become guilty of bad behaviours. Leaders need to model the behaviour they wish to see in their teams, such as being polite, engaging with others, and being positive even in the face of difficulty. Engaging and inspiring people are perhaps the

most important elements of being a successful leader because, without engaged, committed people, the business cannot fulfil its objectives.

Leaders can use their own behaviour to provide a compelling reason for people to follow them in a way that underlines the subtle difference between leading in an inspirational, charismatic way and simply being followed from a functional perspective. The former is more likely to lead to continued business improvement and success. Leaders also need to project an air of confidence, to inspire confidence in others. This may be one reason why so many senior leaders in UK business life are recruited from other countries; it is a very British thing to understate and play down your strengths and abilities but, if you do so, it can be hard to command the necessary level of respect and authority.

Just as businesses are subject to constant change, today's leaders must continually adapt their vision, their strategies, their networks, their behaviours and their skills as needed. A combination of external support and personal resilience helps leaders to navigate that change and enables them to lead and manage their people and their business more effectively. Focusing on leadership, rather than daily management, also helps leaders to respond more quickly to change and to deliver rapid results.

A comparatively small investment in the personal and professional development of an organisation's leaders – particularly compared to the potential cost of business failure or failing to anticipate changes in the marketplace – can yield significant business and financial benefits. **TJ**

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