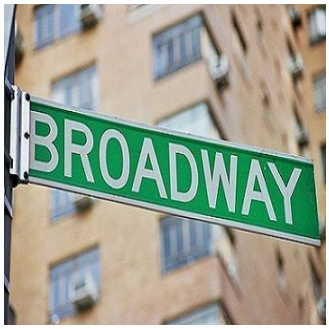
The Show Must Go On?



A paper published in the journal *Organizational Dynamics* provides a leadership learning framework developed as a result of the authors' research with Broadway producers. This framework will enable individuals to develop personal leadership learning strategies as well as encourage organisations to provide opportunities that foster effective leadership development, the authors say.

For this study, Stuart Paul, PhD, University of the West of Scotland, and Geoff Whittam, PhD, Glasgow Caledonian University, conducted in-depth interviews with 19 of the most successful Broadway producers who collectively hold over 300 producing credits on Broadway plays and musicals. These credits include huge successes such as War Horse, Evita, Annie, The Producers and Spamalot. But all these producers have also experienced failure on Broadway — with some shows closing early, sometimes after only a few weeks.

The critical activity for the producer is to assemble and lead a team in which creative and commercial talents combine to realise her or his vision. This requires the hiring of a director and other creative staff, such as the designer, as well as approving the cast, which may include star actors who can command a salary of many thousands of dollars per week. In parallel with this, a producer also has to recruit commercial specialists in fields that include accounting, marketing and theatre operations.

The research sought to find out not only what Broadway producers do in order to lead their teams successfully but also how they have learned to lead. Based on the findings, the researchers identified six key guidelines upon which individual leadership learning strategies can be based:

Successful leaders build their tacit knowledge. All leadership positions require the individual concerned to acquire and hone explicit knowledge. This type of knowledge is personal, hard to define, and is rooted in action and practical experience. It is acquired through learning by doing and provides an individual with what Wagner and Sternberg famously called "street smarts."

Envisioning works best as a two-stage process. Envisioning the future is fundamental to most approaches of transformational and charismatic leadership. Envisioning works best when a leader views it as a two-stage process: A leader needs to invest time conducting a conversation with herself/himself in order to refine and construct an image of the future in which she/he truly believes. Thereafter, the leader must effectively communicate this vision to those stakeholders who can help make the vision a reality.

Feedback helps develop leadership learning. To develop leadership capability, evidence from this study suggests that individuals should seek, and carefully reflect upon, feedback from trusted colleagues. Building a small network of trusted confidants should be a priority for those who aspire to be effective leaders.

Leadership learning is a continuous process. Leadership learning has no cut-off date. A combination of learning by doing, reflecting and networking helps leaders to update continuously their knowledge and skills by understanding better what works well, and in what situations.

Reflection facilitates leadership learning. A capacity for reflection helps leaders develop a mindset able to process and absorb new data, which challenges existing beliefs and patterns of thinking. This capacity to keep an "open mind" is vital and emphasises the dynamic nature of leadership learning.

Leadership learning is a social process. Learning to lead is, in large measure, shaped by the density and quality of social interactions, and governed not solely by the leader but by the leader in interaction with her or his environment. Interacting with others is also a way in which a leader continuously learns.

"For well over a hundred years, Broadway has successfully survived economic cycles of boom and bust. Indeed, it has not only survived but prospered... This survival and growth has been due, in large measure, to the leadership of the industry," the authors write. "This paper has sought to establish the lessons that can be learned from these successful leaders with the objective of providing guidance for leaders in other business sectors."

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