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# Risk and permission

The core of good leadership for the modern day

Roderick Millar shares his innovative approach to leadership, which balances devolved decision-making and retaining overall control.



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The world is awash with leadership advice, and research from countless business schools and consultants frequently lists out the key characteristics of good leaders. These tend to fall into two categories: the lead yourself, lead your team, lead your organisation approach, and then the long ‘to do’ lists of set clear objectives, communicate well, build trust, be adaptable, empower your team etc. Neither of these approaches are wrong, but both fall foul of the tendency leadership developers have, which is believing most people roll out of bed in the morning thinking: “I’m a leader, so what must I do to lead today?”

The truth is most of us do not envision ourselves as leaders, but rather as doctors, anaesthetists, nurses, caterers, engineers, marketers or whatever we may be. We start our days checking off the things left undone from yesterday and prioritising the ‘to do’ list of things to be done today to allow normal service to continue. We have very little time to reflect calmly on our leadership style and actions.

## Limitations of leadership programmes

Leadership programmes are highly valuable in that they create space in frantic schedules for reflection, but they also suffer from the downside of all formal classroom learning, which has severe limitations. The German psychologist, Hermann Ebbinghaus, described his ‘forgetting curve’ in the 1870s, and our brains have evolved very little since then. Our ability to retain new information, without a simultaneous emotional experience to embed it, is very limited. So trying to check-off those lists or explore your leadership self, team and organisation a week after the programme has finished is always going to be a challenge.

There is a further wrinkle in this process too. Much of the advice we give would-be leaders is along the lines of build trust, empower others and create empathy. Trust, empowerment and empathy are all excellent things for a leader to have, but they are not

simple to acquire. Indeed, trust is a ‘gift word’, it is something bestowed on us by others, not something we can acquire ourselves in any direct way.

These barriers go some way towards explaining why, although we know what good leadership looks like, the leadership development sector continues to struggle to develop consistently good leaders. The space to practise leadership skills is very limited, our ability to remember what those skills are is severely restricted, and the process of translating what we know to be good practice into practice is not easy.

“TRUST IS A ‘GIFT WORD’, IT IS SOMETHING BESTOWED ON US BY OTHERS, NOT SOMETHING WE CAN ACQUIRE OURSELVES”

## A new leadership mindset

Having spent the last decade exploring and reviewing leadership development initiatives at top business schools and in large organisations around the world, it becomes ever clearer that what is required is not those ‘to do’ lists of good leadership behaviours and practices but getting people to buy into a new leadership mindset that is clear and simple.

## Devolve decision-making

Research shows that in the vast majority of situations happy people are productive people; so, ensuring your staff are enjoying what they do is important. A very good way to stop people being happy is to reduce their control and responsibility. As Columbia professor Gita Johar has expressed to me and highlighted in a paper with colleagues (Faraji-Rad et al. 2016), the need for control is a basic human desire, and when it is removed either explicitly or implicitly, we lose something—call it energy, enthusiasm, or engagement.

This observation lies at the heart of good leadership. As noted, good leaders have many skills, but ultimately they get people to achieve desired outcomes. In the high-velocity, complex business environment we now have to work in, no-one can understand all the details and know all the facts that are emerging and evolving across our workplaces. It is therefore necessary for everyone at every level to devolve decision-making to the lowest level they dare to. It is the leader's responsibility to assess downside risk and empower people to make decisions as far down the hierarchy as is possible.

### Remove fear through collaboration

By removing fear from the workplace, extraordinary things can happen. Applied neuroscientist Prof. Paul Brown writes extensively on this in his book, *The Fear-Free Organization*. Initially, just giving people the ability to make decisions is great for morale, it then leads to new ideas and concepts emerging, and so procedures can improve and innovation occur. In order for these things to happen, I am not advocating unilateral changes by lots of individuals, as that approach is where chaos and anarchy lies. Changes have to be discussed and collaborative. But they do not necessarily need to be approved and endorsed from above on every occasion. It is the leader's role to be the architect of their working environments, to enable people to feel comfortable taking responsibility and control.

### Responding to the modern work environment

In a work environment where people are constantly changing job and taking on different and varied roles, the old 'work contract' of follow the rules and keep your head down and in return you end up with a stable job and valuable pension no longer applies. Work is less certain and pensions are more flexible (and less valuable), so different motivators need to be offered to keep people willing to give their knowledge and labour in return for employment. Today, these motivators are much more likely to be intrinsic ones, such as purpose and wellbeing, than purely extrinsic ones like pay and promotion.

I call this the risk and permission approach to leadership. The overriding imperative all leaders should have is to devolve decision processes as far down the hierarchy as they feel they can. This requires the leader to assess the responsibility risk: does this level of staff have sufficient access to information to make an informed decision? Do they have enough

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experience to make a sensible judgement call? What might the consequences of a poor decision be? Am I prepared to take that risk?

### Grant explicit permission and control

If the answers to the risk questions are all positive, then it is the leader's task to clearly grant permission to those people to take on the responsibility. This permission granting ideally should be as explicit as possible: "don't ask me, you decide", "you have enough information to make that call yourself, have a think about it and let me know what you decide", "discuss it with the team, and do what you think best."

“ IT IS THE LEADER'S ROLE TO BE THE ARCHITECT OF THEIR WORKING ENVIRONMENTS ”

The vast majority of decisions we have to make are not mission critical. The failures we often encounter come from indecision rather than wrong decisions. Most choices can be iterated and adapted once they are made, so if they are sub-optimal ones they can be improved later on.

### Retain the ability to overrule

The risk and permission approach is flexible—the leader, whilst empowering their followers, must always retain the ability to withdraw permission or overrule. It is important as a leader, that you have 'skin in the game'. If it goes wrong, you remain responsible; therefore, you must be able to step in and change things if you perceive the risk as becoming too great.

Clearly, there are many situations, especially in high-risk, zero-tolerance sectors such as healthcare, where changing work processes cannot be allowed without significant high-level approval. Risk and permission allows for leaders to maintain this, but also allows them to identify those areas where that level of restriction is not required.

### A core leadership focus

By limiting your core leadership skills to just assessing risk and granting (or declining) permission, you set off a domino-like series of other actions. By empowering others, you are trusting them and in return

you will be trusted. It requires you to set clear goals and objectives—otherwise people cannot know what their aim is. You will improve their levels of engagement, and by being more engaged it is highly likely that they will be more adaptive and innovative, and so more productive. Empowered teams tend to be more cohesive and collaborative ones too.

### Develop others

The further advantage of pushing decision-making down the line, rather than up it—as is more traditional—is that it encourages you to ensure that the correct skills have been developed to allow permission to be given. Today's managers have tended to lose the ability to encourage and develop others. The old master-apprentice relationship is making a return, but it can surely happen faster.

The irony of devolving decision-making away from yourself to others is that with greater trust gifted to you, greater influence will accrete to you too. You will also, if you are doing it well, discover that you have more time for other tasks if much of your previous role has been devolved.

I look forward to a time when the sign of a good leader is not how many decisions they have to make—but how few. ■

## KEY POINTS



- ✓ Traditional leadership programmes rarely allow enough time and space for permanent behaviour change to occur, so the process of translating what we know to be good practice into practice is not easy.
- ✓ Control and responsibility is a modern motivator
- ✓ Assessing risk and granting permission produces more adaptive and productive staff and frees more time for yourself



## REFERENCE

Faraji-Rad et al. (2016) Consumer desire for control as a barrier to new product adoption. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.