

Fact-File 13: Defining Leadership... the 8 roles real leaders play



Extract from our program Guide - Learning to Lead: Laying Foundations for Leadership

Defining Leadership...

Books, theories, scholars and websites on leadership abound. There's almost as many definitions as there are people who've attempted to describe what leadership really is.

Whether part of the formal hierarchy or not, great leadership is easy to recognise. We know it when we see it. Just like you can tell when someone's lacking in leadership qualities. But how do you define it?

It may sound like a pointless pursuit. But leadership is what you make of it and the mental models or ingrained beliefs we have about what good leaders should do, influence how we actually lead far more than what we're aware of. For example, the public profile of a good leader lauded in the press still regularly cites attributes like 'tough, decisive, hard-nosed, quick-to-judge, ultra-rational and results-driven'. If you believe it, you'll try to be it.

To make it more difficult, leadership definitions don't all focus on the same thing. Is it a set of personal qualities or attributes? Is it innate – a skill some of us seem born with and naturally display? Is it a driving force emerging from human social patterns or a set of actions, roles or behaviours that can be copied and learned?

One thing all writers and organisations seem agree on is that leadership matters.

Whether it's sport, business, school or social action group, there's no doubt that leadership quality makes a big difference to bottom-line results – accounting for between 20 and up to as much as 45% of an organisation's performance. So building up the skills of leaders is a big concern in all forward-thinking organisations who value their future.

The real Roles of Leaders

Most of us know what leaders are supposed to do. They come up with strategies, co-ordinate resources, plan changes, schedule activities and keep an eye on how people perform. Fewer of us really know how to lead: how to infuse enthusiasm, shape a shared vision, inspire commitment, mobilise energy, be a coach, culture-creator, meaning-maker, relationship-builder, facilitator, perspective-taker and change-maker...

The role of managers has changed worldwide. We're being asked to step out of some fairly embedded mindsets and lead a more formidable array of changes and improvements as part of our daily work, something few of us feel well-equipped for.

More and more leaders now connect successful outcomes to their ability to keep learning new skills, tools and roles that differ dramatically from older mental models of managing and over the last 10 years, there's been some dramatic shifts in thinking about the kind of roles leaders should play to add value to their organisations, connect with their people and take their organisations into the future.



Learning to really lead, involves a different set of skills and roles, as this diagram shows. To incorporate these into your own leadership approach, you need to dislodge those old mental models of management and learn to lead in some very different ways. For example:

- The conventional notion of leaders as 'special people' who invent the vision, set directions, make the key decisions and come up with the ideas has had it's day. In information-rich, networked and complex, collective cultures, no single person can be expected to have all the answers.
- The leader's new roles in this environment are increasingly about leveraging learning to mobilise coalitions, networking, challenging prevailing mental models, developing shared visions and creating supportive emotional climates that unleash innovation and learning potential in others.

An underlying framework we use in our leadership learning clinics are the 8 new roles of

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leaders. Let's look over a little more what each of these roles involves...

Role 1: Influencers

'Influencer' is the word by far the most frequently connected to leadership. Leaders are people who persuade others to follow a direction and accomplish things that matter. How they do this has spawned a whole industry devoted to isolating and analysing the different 'influence-styles' of leadership.

There's no doubt leaders spend a lot of time doing this – just as they do bringing people and resources together and coaxing them to exert effort and take action to achieve outcomes and get results.

Role 2: Vision-shapers

The second most common role of leaders is they inspire commitment and focus through shaping shared visions. This doesn't mean the leader has to come up with the vision – though many lead through doing just that – nor that they wait around for top management to do it.

Good leaders know people need to pursue a purpose and they work with their teams to find out what the direction should be. Being able to shape shared visions that are powerful, compelling and clear and having the passion, determination and courage to make it happen is a pre-eminent part of the art of leadership.

Role 3: Change-makers

Leaders are key drivers of change – they play a critical role in preparing people for it, communicating clearly about it, getting people on board with it and then mobilising them to make the change.

Good leaders go about change with quiet persistence. They stand by their change commitments despite uncertainty, personal risk or strong opposition and bounce back from the inevitable failures and setbacks.

Role 4: Culture-creators

How leaders lead has a lot to do with the sort of work culture they create – the prevailing patterns of thinking, doing and acting.

Good leaders know they provide a model and moral compass for the people they lead – that

their values and actions may be the biggest, single culture-shaping influence around. They monitor how much the current culture is helping or hindering; they're always alert to the need to keep it positive and healthy; and they act as staunch defenders and preservers of the useful aspects, courageous changers of the not-so-good

Role 5: Perspective-takers

Leaders act as meaning-makers. They help people around them make sense of both the big, strategic things *and* the small everyday things.

Leaders are those who can step-back and see the big picture – not get bogged down in or distracted by the detail. Leaders need the mental agility to see any situation from many different perspectives, make connections and links others may miss, question accepted ways of doing or thinking and help show others how to do this too.

Role 6: Emotional care-takers

More leaders now link successful outcomes to their own level of Emotional Intelligence (EI) – their ability to 'tune into themselves' and be more mindful of the impact their feelings and behaviour have on the emotional climate of the people around them.

EI plays a crucial role in effective leadership. It's what helps us cope with frustration, maintain balance, control emotional outbursts, get along well with others and use feelings to more effectively handle our own and other's emotions. It's the basis of connectivity, compassion and resonance and the way to create positive, safe and supportive workplaces that build trust and respect.

Role 7: Facilitators and Coaches

Leaders lead through learning – and facilitating and coaching are the roles they use to do it. They're roles that move you out of managing mode and get you to act more as a guide, mentor and helper. Both roles have one thing in common: they help people solve problems for themselves.

Coaching is a more effective and emotionally intelligent style for leaders who want to build the capacity of others and generate superior performance. A coaching style provides a new way to relate to people and significantly improves productivity, relationships and the way people warm-up to their jobs.

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When you switch to a facilitating style, you help teams achieve tasks using group-working techniques to share information, generate ideas, make decisions, set goals and sort priorities

Role 8: Relationship Team-builders

Team-based work is part of every leader's landscape. Processes don't do the work – people do, working in teams. Getting clearer on what it takes to work well in teams makes a big difference to people fitting in and getting along better together. Without team relationship-building skills, many leaders bumble along, making the same old avoidable errors that get teams in a tangle.

Leaders need to know how to form teams – then facilitate them to work collaboratively. They need to maintain and improve them – to help them continuously rethink how to work better together. They also need to build team capability, commitment to common goals and challenges as well as manage team relationships and performance – and they do this largely through conversations.

In fact, leadership can really be seen as a string of conversations through which you organise and co-ordinate action and encourage teams to stay in constructive dialogue and discussions with each other

Great leaders didn't learn these roles overnight by the way. You have to start somewhere on your leadership learning journey – and that's what our *Learning to Lead* programs are all about.



Our 2-day intensive public clinic fast-tracks people through the leadership lessons that really make a difference – using Senge's 5 Learning Disciplines as a framework. It aims to:

- Clarify leadership and explore the critical roles and capabilities you need to lead
- Help you gain insights into why personal mastery and self-awareness matter for great leadership
- Equip you with a leadership toolkit to help handle all those leadership responsibilities you need to tackle on your journey

- Support you in beginning work on your own leadership challenges and help you prepare a personal leadership learning plan

"Learning to Lead was very valuable – time well spent. It gave me a better appreciation of leading, provided good tools and many new skills and insights." David Kiehne, Queensland Health

The notion leaders are '*born, not made*' (so you can't learn leadership) is a deeply entrenched mental model in our society. Because it prejudices the way we think about leadership and constricts new learning, it's also a '*limiting belief*' – a false but extremely powerful cultural myth. No one is born knowing innately how to lead – they *learn how to*.

The challenge of mastering leadership is like any other skill – just like playing the guitar or learning how to rock-climb. It takes will-power, application, perseverance. This is what makes the difference (helped by a positive mindset and reasonable self-confidence) that supports the '*hit-miss-try-again mentality*' necessary for any real learning.

It also takes a determined '*mindfulness*' to learn leadership lessons from every interaction and experience – and keep building on it. Good leaders have the ability to:

- Unlearn old habits, roles or behaviours and re-learn new ones.
- Constantly question what they're doing and how they're doing it – re-inventing themselves as they go.
- Reflect deeply on what happens to them – seeing it as a significant opportunity for learning, change and leadership growth.

The Change Forum offers its Learning to Lead program as a 2-day fast-track public clinic or a series of 1-2 day modules delivered in-house and tailored to particular organisation's leadership learning needs. ☎ 07-4068 7591

This FactFile is derived from *Learning-Centred Leadership: Applying the Tools of the 5 Disciplines to Team Learning and Leadership* – the Guide to Module 1 in The Learning-Centred Leadership Series and precursor to *Learning to Lead: Laying Foundations for Leadership* © Copyright Bill Cropper, The Change Forum 2002-09. You are permitted to copy this document in small quantities within your own organisation for the purpose of learning exchange, provided this acknowledgement appears on all copies and any materials derived from it.

