



Redefining Leadership: the 8 Roles Real Leaders Play...

by Bill Cropper – The Change Forum

Based on extracts drawn from our program Laying Foundations for Leadership © Bill Cropper 2007-15

Everyone expounds on the theme of wanting to be a good leader these days. But how can you be, if you haven't got a clear idea of what leadership really is? Most of us know what leaders are supposed to do. They come up with strategies. They co-ordinate resources, plan changes, schedule activities, and they keep an eye on how people perform.

Yet far fewer of us really know how to lead: how to infuse enthusiasm, shape a shared vision, inspire commitment, mobilise energy, become a coach, culture-creator, meaning-maker, relationship-builder, perspective-taker and change-maker...

What does Leadership mean to you?

Bookshops are brimming with tremendous tomes about it. Leadership definitions, theories and models abound. There's more than 5 million web-pages dedicated to defining leadership, yet still no definitive answer, no one-size-fits-all model – and there probably never will be, which is not such a bad thing.

Distilling definitions of leadership may seem 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 aspire to lead far more than what we're sometimes aware of. For example, the public profile of a good leader that's applauded in the press, still regularly cite attributes like tough, decisive, hard-nosed, quick-to-judge, ultra-rational and results-driven. *If you believe that, we guess you'll try to be it.*



We all have our own ideas about what being a good leader means. We all know it's got to do with things like finding and retaining followers, persuading, motivating, showing the way, inspiring people to pursue a particular path or course of action, being able to bring out the best in others and helping them to succeed, selflessly. Great leadership is easy to recognise – just as you can sense if someone's lacking in leadership. We know it when we see it. Or rather, we feel it because great leadership moves us in powerful ways our emotional radar instantly picks up. *But how do you define it?*

Leadership Schools of Thought

To make it more daunting, 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?* There have been six major schools of thought about leadership, which we'd sum up under...

1. **The qualities, attributes or character approach** – the idea here is to distil the essence of what these are from observation of great leaders and then try to emulate these qualities.
2. **The roles, behaviour or actions approach** – is concerned with ‘right actions or behaviour’. It tries to catalogue major roles or behaviours good leaders play or actions they take. The idea is that if we start acting that way, we’ll become good leaders too.
3. **Situational or styles approach** – emphasises that different styles, qualities and actions are needed in different leadership contexts or situations, codifies styles and predicts what typical situations suit certain styles and what actions and behaviours will be called for.
4. **The relational approach** – starts from the premise that leaders almost always get things done through others so having the ability to forge productive, sustainable and useful relationships really precedes any other action leaders take and so needs highlighting.
5. **The transformational approach** – singles out the leader’s role in transforming organisations, overturning and challenging current models and concepts, and creating new awareness, and new ways of thinking and doing things that represent radical departures from accepted norms and conventions. In a sense this is the leader as ‘radical’ free agent.
6. **The driving-concept approach** – focuses on a particular, overarching concept as the key driver or essence behind leadership, and then traces everything that successful leaders do back to this single point. This has generated terms like “*principle-centred leadership*”, “*resonant leadership*”, “*visionary leadership*”, “*authentic leadership*” and so on...

Of these six, the character school – identifying qualities and attributes of good leaders – is enjoying a resurgence in recent years. This is certainly the oldest school, harking back to the ancients. For instance, Aristotle, tutor to Alexander the Great, invoked various leader qualities, the foremost being “...*practical wisdom...the capacity to see what is good for themselves and for humankind*”. Maybe it was the inbuilt imprecision in defining what such qualities look like in action that got Alexander off-course in the end.

The 8 Roles Real Leaders Play

The role of leaders has changed worldwide. Command, control and coercion are ‘out’ – collaboration, connectivity and dare I say it, compassion, are ‘in’. We need to step out of some fairly embedded mindsets and lead a more formidable array of complex changes 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.

- Over the last 15 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, take organisations into the future and stay true to themselves.

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 a few, very different ways. The 8 Leader-Roles is a unifying framework I use in our leadership learning clinics. Here’s a brief look at what each of these roles involves:

Role 1: Influencers & Mobilisers

‘Influencer’ is the word by far most frequently connected to leadership. Leaders are people who persuade others to follow a direction with them 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-and-Value 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 come up with it either.

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, and courageous eradicators 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 as well as 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.

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: Team Relationship-Builders

Working in and through teams is part of every leader's landscape. Getting clearer on what it takes to **work better together** in teams makes a big difference to people fitting in and getting along well. 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, **Leaders-as-Conversation-Makers** is almost a ninth role because it's through conversations that leaders largely enact the other roles. Leadership can almost 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. **Laying Foundations for Leadership**, our 2-day intensive public clinic fast-tracks people through the 8 roles and associated leadership lessons that really make a difference.

As a leadership learning practitioner, coach and presenter, my purpose is to help others discover their inherent leadership potential by facilitating down-to-earth practical programs and providing people with tools that can help transform them and create lasting and positive culture and behaviour change.

The Change Forum offers its **Learning to Lead Foundations** 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. More on-line at www.thechangeforum.com.

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