

*Optimising
your
leadership*

stepshift



Growing As a Leader During Times of Change

Times of change and challenge provide the perfect opportunity to grow your leadership capability



FREE LEADERSHIP ARTICLE

Introduction

Change is a constant in life and business life is no exception. The last few years in particular have proved difficult for many leaders with weaker market activity, stronger competition and squeezed margins sitting alongside challenging budgets and shareholder demands. Tough environments like this create pressure on staff and morale can nosedive. When staff engagement is low, surviving, rather than thriving, becomes the modus operandi.

“*Anyone can hold the helm when the sea is calm.*”

Publilius Syrus (Latin writer, 1st century BC)

The leader's (and leadership team's) role is absolutely critical for the organisation, and for the leader, during these times of change. Critical for the organisation because successfully implementing change will provide an essential foundation for ongoing success, and critical for the leader because these periods of change play a big role in defining their leadership effectiveness and career prospects. During these times of high workload, high expectations and high pressure, many leaders can struggle to understand their leadership and how best to optimise their performance.

The purpose of this article is to provide leaders with a framework for reflecting on how they are currently leading and what could make a positive difference to the results they are getting. It is a useful exercise at any time but particularly in challenging times when results are critical and leadership holds the key to delivering those results.

Framework

To determine whether the leadership results you are getting are optimal, use the following framework to reflect on what you can do to improve:

1. **Reality check** – How am I as a leader and how does this impact my people?
2. **Vision** – How would I like to be as a leader? Why?
3. **Gaps** – What will it take to close the gaps between my current leadership reality and my leadership vision?
4. **Action** – What am I prepared to commit to doing to achieve that?

1. Reality Check (Self Awareness)

In his book **Good to Great**, Jim Collins coined the phrase “*confront the brutal facts*”. Although it was used there in a different context, it can apply equally to those wanting to understand their leadership and how to get the best from it.

One of the dimensions of emotional intelligence critical to effective leadership is self-awareness. In essence this encompasses an ability to accurately assess one’s own strengths and capabilities, an ability to understand one’s emotions and their impact on others and a sound sense of one’s self worth and capabilities.

In a senior role, the affliction described as “CEO disease”(Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, Primal Leadership) is common. It is described as “*the information vacuum around a leader created when people withhold important (usually unpleasant) information*”. Without regular, honest feedback, senior people can fall into the trap of thinking they are being highly effective, when the reality can be quite different.

To build an accurate picture of how you are as a leader, self-reflection is the starting point. We also recommend eliciting feedback (in a carefully structured way) from a range of your people, to uncover any blind spots. It helps to have both processes facilitated by a third party, such as an executive coach or a trusted mentor.

Once you are satisfied you have honestly looked at yourself in the leadership mirror, you are ready to create a vision for your leadership future.

“A study of CEOs by Professor Eric Harter found that self awareness of leadership abilities was greatest for the CEOs of best performing companies and poorest for the CEOs of worst performing companies.”

Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence, By Goleman, McKee Boyatzis

2. Create Your Leadership Future

Successful businesses are careful to create a vision for the future and to identify and work on strategies to achieve that vision. The person interested in leadership improvement must also work in a planned, strategic way. Creating a personal leadership vision is a powerful motivator for change. A leader who is clear on what their enhanced leadership looks and feels like is akin to an elite athlete with a vision of championship success. Both use their vision to identify the strategies they will need to achieve it. Day-to-day actions are connected to those strategies.

Working in a conscious, planned way towards achievement of a vision greatly enhances the likelihood of success.

3. Identify Gaps

A leader who has completed a reality check and created their leadership vision will be in a good position to identify the specific gaps to be worked on. Most leaders are cognisant of leadership theory and aware of high profile leadership success stories. However many struggle to identify the specific areas they should focus on to enhance their own leadership success. Following steps 1 and 2 above will make this process significantly easier.

4. Take Action

Insanity: Doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. (Albert Einstein)

Up to this point in the process (steps 1, 2 and 3 above) the leader will have been engaged in reflection and planning. Step 4 requires action based on the desire to close the gaps. This can mean experimenting with new behaviours or thought processes. As with making any change to the way we habitually operate, it can feel awkward at first, and consistent practice is required to achieve mastery.

The leader needs to establish clear written outcomes they want to achieve, specific actions they will take and the measures of success. During the change process, it is important to engage support people (internal or external to the business) to use as a sounding board and for encouragement to keep on track.

Key Questions to Ask Yourself

Leaders are busy people and have many demands on their time. Here are some questions to help you determine if you are ready to commit time and focus to your leadership development.

1. Reality Check

- Do I get honest, regular 360-degree feedback about my leadership?
- Do I regularly take time to reflect on my actions and behaviour – what I have done well, what I could have done better?
- Have I had feedback that I have disagreed with?

2. Create a Vision

- Can I describe my ideal version of myself as a leader?
- Am I clear on my values and do I consciously act on them?

- Do I have a 3-5 year plan for myself?

3. Identify Gaps

- Have I identified (or am I currently working on) specific leadership development areas?
- Am I confident that these are the areas that will enable me to achieve my leadership vision, in a way that is cognisant with my values?

4. Take Action

- Do I genuinely want to make changes?
- Am I prepared to feel some initial uncertainty or discomfort as I practice and ingrain new behaviours?

Conclusion

Leadership development is not for wimps. Lester Levy (CE of the New Zealand Leadership Institute) likened it to an endurance sport saying, “...it requires constant practice and preparation, refinement and improvement, with learning being a continual process”.

When you are ready to take an honest look at your leadership, we recommend you start with considering the above questions to help you assess whether you are prepared to do what it takes.

If you would like to discuss your situation, please feel free to contact one of our partners. Stepshift partners facilitate leaders to get the best from themselves and others when improvement is critical. They are highly experienced, professional and absolutely committed to seeing clients achieve fundamental shifts through improved leadership.

Case Study

David* is a senior manager in a large New Zealand organisation. His role is a critical one and he recognised that he was not making the leadership impact he needed to in order to deliver the results required by the organisation. In particular, he was acutely aware of the need to get his people “to make things happen.” Highly driven, he found himself frustrated by lack of urgency in others and this often resulted in him stepping in to pick up the pieces himself or finding it difficult to control his frustration when dealing with his people. Staff turnover was high and the demands of the business were not easing. Something had to change.

During a structured coaching programme with Stepshift, David reflected on himself a leader. He stepped back and reviewed his strengths and limitations with honesty and carefully considered how his style (a leadership style described by Daniel Goleman in *The New Leaders* as 'pacesetter') impacted his people and their ability to deliver the required outcomes. He spent time considering each of his team members and what they would need to enable them perform at their best.

He then put a tailored plan in place to grow his leadership capability and significantly improve his results. His key areas of focus were all in the 'emotional intelligence' arena:

- Self awareness – Becoming consciously aware of his emotional 'triggers' and taking the time to manage them before they had a destructive effect on those around him
- Self management – improving his ability to stay calm in times of crisis, to take the time to think things through and to remain focused on the outcomes to be achieved, not being wrong-footed by his emotional response to the problem
- Relationship management – building better relationships with his people, and taking time to listen to, coach and develop them
- Visionary leadership – painting the bigger picture for his people, to improve motivation

Twelve months on and the results speak for themselves. It is still a challenging time for the business but staff turnover in David's team has significantly reduced, he is feeling a lot calmer and his people have stepped up their level of skill and delivery. The icing on the cake was the glowing feedback received (unsolicited) from the CEO and Board. They weren't sure exactly what he had done but they like the results!

**David is a Stepshift client and we have changed his name to protect his identity.*

About Stepshift

Stepshift Partners facilitate leaders to get the best from themselves and others when improvement is critical. They are highly experienced, professional and absolutely committed to seeing clients achieve fundamental shifts through improved leadership.

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