Leadership development for uncertain times

These are difficult times for leaders. Political leaders, business leaders, third sector leaders all find themselves having to deal with greater uncertainty as the impact of the 2008 crash continues to rumble around global economies. And the consequences of living in an interconnected world mean no-one is immune from the effects of their neighbours' actions, however remote those neighbours may appear to be.

Faced with these challenges, it is no surprise that a recent poll conducted by Ashridge Business School reported that while 76% of senior managers think that it is important to develop leadership knowledge of the changing global business context, skills in dealing with complexity and the capability to manage interconnectedness, only 7% think that their own companies are doing this effectively.

But in my experience, while there is a great desire among leaders to acquire new knowledge about coping with the challenges of increasing interdependence (and often a matching desire among HR professionals to run programmes to close these knowledge gaps), mature leadership is about more than that. Mature leadership is not about knowing the right answer in every circumstance —it is often about accepting that you can't.

Being right doesn't count

Sometimes the most important lessons are the easiest to state but the hardest to learn. Thirty years ago I was just starting my first job as a graduate engineer at what was then the biggest chemical works in Europe at ICI on Teesside. Armed with all the latest control engineering techniques I was sure I could improve the operation of most of the distillation columns on site, which to my young eyes clearly weren't running at optimal performance. So do you think my enthusiastic advice was met with open arms? Well no, I was told in no uncertain terms what I could do with all my charts and figures. Eventually a kindly shift supervisor took me to one side and said, "What you graduates need to remember is that being right doesn't count for much — here on site".

I was shocked — I knew my calculations were right. But it took me several months and many long conversations with experienced operators to see just how well they knew the machinery on those chemical production lines. And gradually I came to understand why you might not want to run a distillation column at maximum efficiency if that would reduce its long-term reliability or why you might not want to operate a process flat out just before a changeover to a new shift.

Well so much so obvious you might say, but I was reflecting on my own ability to learn that lesson a little while ago when I took charge of preparing one of the many large family meals over the Christmas period. Armed now with many years of leadership training and experience I broke the menu down into simple steps, drew up a timetable, allocated tasks to family members (starting with the youngest as being the least likely to complain), and sat back with a glass of mulled wine, happy that my job was now well in hand. Well you can guess the rest. But if I needed a timely reminder of that 30-year-old lesson there it was in front of me. As a leader, your analysis, solution design, resource allocation and scheduling might be world class but unless you can take people with you, you won't get the turkey cooked on time!

The rise of collaboration — and why all this matters to leaders in 2014

In her recent 2014 Dimbleby Lecture, Christine Lagarde described the challenges leaders face in this "hyper-connected world". As she said: "We are now in a world of integrated supply chains where more than half of total manufactured imports, and more than 70% of total service imports, are intermediate goods."

She is not alone in painting this picture. The Ashridge Business School report I mentioned earlier says for example "Leaders need better insight into greater complexities and interdependencies — this is crucial to the future of organisations, they need people who can do this..."

For the last 12 years my colleague Alex Cameron and I have been working with and advising leaders working across a range of private and public sector environments. We've been specifically studying what it is that some leaders seem able to do to encourage collaboration and discretionary effort in situations where many different organisations have to work together to deliver results. In that time a number of things have become obvious: first, what 12 years ago seemed a rather peripheral area of work has now become mainstream, second the nature of the collaboration is becoming more complex and more mission critical, and third (and rather sadly) many senior managers seem to struggle with the challenges of collaborative leadership.

By collaborative leadership I mean the sort of leadership required to get results across organisational boundaries, and to do that leaders need to excel at three things:

- **building relationships** — often with people from different backgrounds and cultures
- **handling conflict** — that arises from these cross boundary situations, and
- **sharing control** with others.

The most successful collaborative leaders are all interested in other people and invest time in building wide and diverse networks. Some may do that because they are born networkers and others because experience has taught them that they need to consciously develop their contacts and their reputation. But whatever the motivation it is clear that good personal relationships between senior people, based on shared values and common concerns, are an essential foundation when it comes to creating successful collaborative relationships between the organisations that they lead.

Building skills in handling conflict is important because in any collaborative relationship there will be some points of tension. Different parties will always have somewhat different objectives to each other's. If the relationship is well founded these will be reasonably well aligned, but as time moves on there is always the likelihood of different objectives bringing people and groups into conflict. And some conflict arises because one or more individuals simply cannot, or choose not to, collaborate whatever the situation. Successful collaborative leaders need to be able to recognise the early signs of conflict as useful warnings of hidden differences in objectives or priorities. In that way the visibility of conflict and criticism in a collaborative relationship is like the first signs of a muscle strain for an athlete, a useful warning that must not be ignored. Collaborative leaders need to listen for the signs of conflict and respond quickly. Once a leader has noticed the signs of conflict they must then be confident in handling it — in ways that result in increased understanding from all parties about the needs of their partners rather than a bloodbath! As writer Max Lucado once put it "conflict is inevitable but combat is optional".

The third element — sharing control — is central to collaborative leadership because in an inter-dependent world no-one can succeed on their own — nor can they succeed by dominating their partners and controlling all they do. Across that boundary are other leaders who will fight back if they feel over-controlled.

There needs to be a mutual understanding of what sharing control means in each specific context. Sharing control in a collaborative relationship doesn't mean giving power to others so they can function without you. It means recognising where and when you have to be completely aligned and take decisions together — and being able to act independently (within agreed limits) outside those points. It also means recognising that you cannot achieve your individual objectives without each other and are tied together by long-term overarching concerns — particularly your shared reputation with customers.

Because the ability to share control is so important you could perhaps say it was the number one defining capability of a collaborative leader. But looking at most leadership development programmes the emphasis is still on mechanisms of control. Whether it is in terms of project leadership where controlling the classic triangle of time, cost, and quality reigns supreme, or in strategic leadership programmes where there is still great focus on identifying means of securing competitive advantage and controlling the execution of strategic plans. But in today's collaborative, highly-interdependent, delivery environments the big challenge for many leaders is that the only way to succeed is to be able to share control — with partners, contractors, or even government regulators. And in a situation of shared control… being right doesn't count for much!

New skills for old problems

So what does it take to be able to share control, to build trust in others and to enable them to build trust in you? Well fundamentally it means being able to stand in the shoes of your business partners and understand their objectives, their pressures and what motivates them — even if these things are very different from your own. Actually a colleague put it much more graphically when she said "it's not just standing in your partner's shoes, it's running a marathon in them and knowing precisely where they are going to give you blisters".

But to get down to more specific details of the skills and attitudes required in leaders to enable them to deliver results in collaborative environments I've used 360°feedback questionnaires and dozens of structured interviews to try to tease out what it is that successful leaders do differently. The results are summarised in the section below — this describes the three critical skills and three essential attitudes that I believe HR professionals need to be thinking about alongside the more traditional elements of leadership when planning development programmes.

Based on our research on collaborative leadership and successful joint delivery we have identified **three critical skills**.

- **Influencing** — the ability to match the most effective method of influence to the needs of the situation and the parties involved. This is different from the conventional inter-personal influencing that is taught on many personal development programmes. In a collaborative context leaders need to share control across complex systems of different organisations and external stakeholders. This ability to influence often requires an understanding of organisational culture and personality type as well as an objective analysis of the business situation to hand.

- **Engagement** — building relationships across organisational boundaries, communicating with clarity and involving others in decision making. One thing is certain about collaborative leadership — you cannot do it on your own so the ability to find common purpose and to engage others, sometimes in large and disparate communities, is crucial. The ability to use social media and other online engagement tools can play a useful part here and collaborative leaders often need to develop their skills and confidence in this area.

- **Mediation** — the ability to address conflict situations as soon as they arise - building the confidence of others in the process. The foundation of this skill is the ability to help people understand each other's motives and perspectives. This knowledge can then be used by all parties to find ways of working together which are constructive, sustainable and which achieve the objectives of their joint enterprise. After running many 360° feedback programmes, it is clear that the demands of handling conflict, and the associated mediation skills, are often the number one leadership development priority.

In support of these skills, there are **three essential attitudes** that collaborative leaders possess.

- **Agility** — to assimilate facts quickly, ask incisive questions, find new options, and handle complexity with ease. In these complex situations, collaborative leaders need to be quick thinking and to be able to respond to developing issues in a timely manner.

- **Patience** — to take a calm and measured approach in a crisis, reflecting on new information and giving confidence to others. This attitude is sometimes described as "stickability". Collaborative leaders build relationships for the long run. They know that in a true partnership you can't always dictate the speed of progress on your own. This may seem at odds with "agility" but all the most successful leaders combine both. They can think on their feet and jointly develop innovative ways forward — but they are also invested for the long term and have a patient attitude towards their partners.

- **Empathy** — to truly listen, understanding personal impact and taking an open-minded attitude to the views and opinions of others. The underpinning attitude of many a collaborative leader is a willingness to truly listen, to be open-minded to the views of others however different they may be, and to have a high degree of self-awareness of the impact their leadership behaviour on others. Empathy may be last on this list but it's often the first thing you notice about a really experienced and successful collaborative leader.

The desire for standards — necessary but not sufficient

Of course, I'm not the first person to have noticed the rise of collaboration and the need for organisations/individuals to respond to this trend and the challenges that it brings. In recent years there has been a drive to define standard processes and systems to help people tackle the challenges of interdependence and collaborative working. In 2010 the BSI published the first international standard for collaboration and since then this BS11000 standard has slowly been adopted in a number of industries (particularly construction and defence contracting in the first instance) as one means of helping leaders to manage collaborative

relationships more effectively. Now there is much good practice in this standard but essentially it is a process-based approach to tackling a relationship-based problem and that can only go so far. In my opinion, systems and approved paperwork count for very little when a relationship turns sour or a joint project starts going off the rails. At that point what you need are leaders at all levels who can pick up the phone and call their opposite number knowing that their call will be answered and their views will be listened to with genuine understanding. Having the right procedures in place to support collaborative working is a necessary foundation but it's not sufficient to ensure success.

Collaboration is always a voluntary activity. You may be able to enforce basic compliance but you can't mandate active collaboration. At the end of the day in complex interdependent business relationships the people you count on for successful delivery have to want you to succeed in your role as much as you want them to succeed in theirs. And getting to that point relies on leaders being able to develop trusting relationships across organisational boundaries.

So my simply stated lesson for leadership development in 2014 builds on the one I started with 30 years ago. It is because being right doesn't count for much that leaders need to learn how to make friends before they need to call on them in order to deliver successful results in today's highly interdependent global environment.

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About the author

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