

FIRST PUBLISHED:
Journal, Vol 37 / Issue No.3, ANZIIF



GET THE MONKEY OFF YOUR BACK AND OTHER LEADERSHIP TIPS

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MANAGEMENT ISSUES

GET THE MONKEY OFF YOUR BACK

AND OTHER LEADERSHIP TIPS

Effective leaders deliver results, but what makes an effective leader? John Dawson outlines some of the key leadership behaviours and practices that not only deliver results, but also make people want to work with that leader. He argues that true leadership is granted from below, not handed down from on high.



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Highly successful entrepreneurs often don't show the style of leadership that would endear them to you or me if we worked for them. Jeff Bezos has built the amazing Amazon retailing giant from scratch. These quotes appeared in *The Age* review of a biography of Bezos:

"If you're not good, Jeff will chew you up and spit you out," notes one former employee, "and if you're good, he will jump on your back and ride you into the ground".

In 2011, it was revealed that the company skimped on airconditioning for its stifling warehouses. Instead, it contracted paramedics to wait nearby so fainting workers could be cheaply conveyed to hospital.¹

In this article I won't be giving tips about how to become a leader like Bezos. Instead I want to focus on some key leadership behaviours and practices that get results and make people want to work with that leader. These ideas are drawn from my study of leadership and my practical experience over many years as a leader and a coach to other leaders.

LEADERSHIP AND INFLUENCE

There are literally hundreds of definitions of leadership. My preference is for a definition that is simple to understand, with a focus on getting results.

"Command and control style leadership was about telling people what to do. Persuasion and influence begins with active listening ..."

Dr Donald Tosti, one of our partners in Persona Global, is recognised as an international expert on leadership and performance improvement. He has been described as a pioneer in the application of behavioural science to organisations and his definition is:

Leadership is the capacity to influence others to take appropriate action to achieve desired results.

The Leadership Model Tosti offers encompasses 36 leadership practices under three core segments of direction, motivation and guidance. This is a model we have used with success in many organisations. To be fully effective a leader has to:

- > deliver the results required today
- > prepare the team for a changing tomorrow, so that results are sustainable.

We could refer to this as "performance" and "change" leadership. Tosti's model covers both aspects:

Direction

- > Goals: aiming for results.
- > Vision: creating the future.

Motivation

- > Reward/recognition: energising for action.
- > Expectations/initiative: freeing the potential to contribute.

Guidance

- > Coaching: supporting development.
- > Modelling: leading by deeds.

I don't intend to go over this model in detail here. Instead I want to draw on my own experience to focus on a few issues that are really important to success in leadership. Each of these connects back to the Tosti Leadership Model.

FOCUS ON RESULTS

As leaders we need to make sure that everyone on the team is very clear about the results the business needs to achieve and exactly how each person's role will contribute to the organisational results. This sounds blindingly obvious but so often in organisations we work with, these vital issues are far from clear to each person.

We often find that individuals don't have a clear understanding of how their own role contributes to the overarching results of the organisation. Too frequently we also find:

- **Overlap:** where more than one person is working towards the same objective without realising that others in the organisation are working on exactly the same thing and there is no collaboration.
- **White spaces in the hand-offs:** this occurs where A completes part of a task or project and then hands this off to B to complete the next stage. Between A and B an important step is missed but each thinks the other has completed it.

PERSUASION AND INFLUENCE

Command and control style leadership is dead. Dr Tosti's definition puts great stress on "the capacity to influence others to take appropriate action". This links strongly to an argument advanced by management guru Peter Drucker:

*Increasingly employees have to be managed as partners and it is the definition of a partnership that all partners are equal. It is also the definition of a partnership that partners cannot be ordered. **They have to be persuaded.***² [my emphasis]

The ability to persuade and influence others is now a vitally important competence for leaders. We often see people, promoted to leadership roles from technical responsibilities, who struggle as leaders when they find that their technical competence is not enough to successfully direct, motivate and guide their team. The missing link is competence in persuasion and influencing skills.

This can certainly be a challenge in the insurance industry. So many people are promoted to leadership roles because they've been very successful as technical specialists or subject matter experts, but they are not given coaching in the fundamentals of leadership to help them succeed in their new role.

Command and control style leadership was about telling people what to do. Persuasion and influence begins with active listening to understand the views of others. As Peter Drucker said:

*Increasingly therefore the management of people is a marketing job and in marketing one does not begin a question with "What do we want?" One begins the question with "What does the other party want? What are its values? What are its goals? What does it consider results?"*³

TOUGH CONVERSATIONS

Never, ever avoid tough conversations you need to have with someone who is not performing up to standard. Everyone in your team will quickly spot your avoidance and this leads them to two conclusions:

- Performance standards are obviously not as important as you said they were.
- Why should I go on working really hard striving to meet these standards when others don't and obviously get away with it?

In these tough conversations, keep the focus on the business result not the individual. In all the coaching we have done to help people handle performance reviews effectively, one of the toughest tasks for leaders is to learn how to keep the heat out of the discussion. If the other person gets emotional just redirect attention to the business result and how to solve this. If the emotional temperature is still high it's best to postpone the discussion, asking them to think carefully before you reconvene, about issues that interfered with delivering the business result.

GET THE MONKEY OFF YOUR BACK

Get the monkey off your back by stopping people delegating up. You give someone a task, they find it difficult and come back to ask you what they should do. This is delegating up and if you accept this it distracts you from your proper role and does nothing to help them develop.

Every time this happens ask the person coming to you, "What is your recommendation?" They quickly learn that they must come up with solutions before asking your opinion. You then have the option of supporting their solution or explaining why you would act differently. In either case it is a learning opportunity for your team member and you have got the monkey off your back.

GIVE CREDIT, TAKE BLAME

Good leaders are quick to give public credit to the team and individual members when things go well. When things don't go so well, they accept the accountability personally and never say the failure was caused by the team or one of its members.

ASK FOR FEEDBACK

Members of your team will always be looking for more feedback from you as their leader. Good leaders also ask their team members for feedback on their leadership performance. For example, "What do I do or not do that makes it harder for you to do your job?" It can be challenging to start asking this question, but rewarding to act on the feedback you get.

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES?

There is little doubt that magnifying differences between generations has been turned into an industry by some consultants. However, sweeping generalisations are always dangerous and it is difficult to find rigorous research to support some of these conclusions. A 2009 study into generational differences in the workplace by the Conference Board of Canada showed more consistency than differences.

Their report comprised a review of literature on generations in the workplace, combined with the Conference Board's 2009 National Survey on Generations in the Workplace, which surveyed more than 900 Canadian workers – including "Boomers", "Gen Xers", and "Gen Yers".

While a few of the perceptions around generational differences were found to be grounded in some kernels of truth, the Conference Board study suggests these age groups have more in common with each other than many believe.

*When we got down to the level of the individual we said: "What do you really want in the workplace, and what do you want from your employers, and what do you expect of your workplace colleagues?" There were actually an awful lot of similarities... **respect, flexibility, fairness, and the opportunity to do interesting and rewarding work are things people from all age groups want.**" [my emphasis]*

"In my view any good manager has to be a leader and to be effective a leader has to also be a manager."

LEADER OR MANAGER?

Thousands of words have been wasted and a zillion articles printed debating whether being a leader is the same role as that of a manager or something completely different. In my view any good manager has to be a leader and to be effective a leader has to also be a manager.

Leaders must both manage the processes and lead the people.

CAN LEADERSHIP BE LEARNED?

We've come across many people in our consulting and coaching practice who have been told at some stage in their lives that leaders are "born not made" and that they are personally not born leaders. They give up aspirations of leadership. This is wrong because leadership can be learned like any other skill and like every other skill, some will find it easier to learn than others.

YOU ARE THE MODEL

Always remember these two points:

- The people you lead look to you first as the model of how a leader behaves. They will tend to mirror your behaviours in order to be accepted by you as a good team member.
- True leadership is granted from below, not handed down from on high. Your company may appoint you as a leader, but it's only when your team follow you willingly that you have really arrived as a leader. ■

Notes

¹ J Sparrow, "The man who sold the world", The Age, 25 January 2014.

² P Drucker, *Management Challenges for The 21st Century*, Harper and Collins, 1999.

³ *ibid.*



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