

“Lead on – I’m right behind you!”



**The power of the new leadership
paradigm can be summed up with this
command:
“Lead on – I’m right behind you!”**

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Back in the days when I served in the British Navy, we had a phrase to describe a weak or ineffectual leader: “Lead on – I’m right behind you!” This pejorative descriptor was in itself a legacy from World War I, where some officers were known for sending their soldiers “over the top” from the trenches into the battlefield and then following them only when their men had drawn the fire and taken the brunt of the assault. This idea of “who leads who” and “who follows who” in the field of leadership continues to fascinate me, and I see the “Lead on – I’m right behind you” concept at a stage of reversal in these turbulent times. Now, however, the leadership mindset of supporting people by pushing from behind rather than pulling from in front is no longer an indicator of cowardice and fear; it is to be seen as a positive attribute of strong leadership.

This reversal can be attributed to three distinct factors:

1. During the recent downturn, the culpability of senior executives for corporate failures has tarnished the traditional image of a bold, charismatic, dynamic, powerful, omnipotent, infallible Leader crying “Follow me!” from the front of an organisation. The misguided intentions and actions of some highly visible business leaders, plus the ease with which they led many organisations down wrong paths, have come under widespread scrutiny and criticism. The behaviours of such leaders have called into question an employee’s trust in, respect for, and commitment to a singular leader with unfettered power over an organisation’s future. “Leader as hero” is a concept that will be hard to re-establish in the business world.
2. The majority of the workforce – the Baby Boomers plus the GenYers – are keen to have a greater say in determining their own professional destiny.¹ They are also more prepared than Gen-Xers to remain loyal to an organisation. The trade off is that they want more power to control their work, their challenges, their development and their professional enjoyment within that organisation.
3. Much of the emerging business landscape is based on devolved responsibility and shared accountability. Many great examples of the fastest moving, and growing, businesses are those where the original owners have taken an idea and made it possible for many people to be successful. For example, iStockphoto allows any photographer to sell their photographic image to anyone who wants to buy it. YouTube enables anyone to broadcast to the world. This concept of “community as business, business as community” represents the corporate behaviours that people have come to admire and to expect.

¹ See White Paper 3 “Are you answering your ducks when they quack?” If you would like a copy, please send an email to david.ward@wardconsultants.com.

Open-source software development is a model for future leadership² and that model, together with its broader cousin “crowdsourcing,” is the concept that will be developed in this white paper.

Crowdsourcing

Crowdsourcing is emerging rapidly as a product of our interconnectivity through the many layers of the internet. It seems to be “open” for people to make of it what they will, leaving it difficult to define succinctly. Jeff Howe, who wrote an informative article on “The Rise of Crowdsourcing”³ and writes about the subject on his website, offers a definition that suits the purpose of this white paper. He writes: “Crowdsourcing is the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call” and “The application of Open Source principles to fields outside of software”⁴.

And these are the notions that the aspiring leader will have to emulate in order to be accepted and valued in the next phase in the evolution of leadership. At first glance it may seem a big jump from the commercial networks of eBay, YouTube and iStockphoto to the general art of leadership I know. But look more closely at each of these “new” practices, and they all are formed around a basic set of four elements. These elements are the key to introducing “new” leadership to your organisation.

Leadership vs. leadership

But before we get into those four elements, we need to make a step change in our thinking. We need to abandon the term and the concept “Leadership” with a capital “L.” This is too singular, too focused on the one individual and should be discontinued. In its place we see “leadership” – no capital “L,” no sense of one person, no sense of an exclusive small group in the organisation’s mahogany-clad boardroom.

Instead we need to see shared leadership as part of the fabric of the organisation. Along with behaviours like effective communication, empowered innovation and individual pride in what the organisation does, shared leadership should be present throughout the organisation as a part of everyone’s thinking, and action. This is the kind of leadership that permeates the whole organisation, with each member of the organisation seeing it as part of their role to do what they need to do to drive the organisation to reach its aspirations.

It’s fundamentally about inverting the organisational pyramid – getting those traditionally seen to be at the top to support those who traditionally sit underneath them. If an organisation did this and this alone, it would already free up something that has, for decades, lain dormant.

² See White Paper 3 “Are you answering your ducks when they quack?” If you would like a copy, please send an email to david.ward@wardconsultants.com.

³ “The Rise of Crowdsourcing”, Jeff Howe, *Wired Magazine* Issue 14.06 - June 2006, <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds.html>.

⁴ Jeff Howe: Crowdsourcing.net: http://crowdsourcing.typepad.com/cs/2006/05/hi_my_name_is_j.html.

Leadership lifecycle

The life cycle of top executives within an organisation has shortened significantly. This trend was outlined in a recent article⁵ that quotes a study conducted by BlueSteps.com, an online executive talent database of the Association of Executive Search Consultants (AESC).

The study found that “Of the European executives surveyed, 39% had worked for their current organisation for between two and five years, with 51% estimating they will have worked for between four and seven organisations by the end of their career. Forty percent of Europeans stated that a quarter of the senior management staff at their current organisation had been with the company for less than five years.”

The report also revealed that “Fifty-five percent of European respondents believed that two years was the shortest tenure an executive should spend at any one organisation before it would compromise the value of their CV. Twenty-seven percent believed the tenure needed to be at least three years or more before it would impact their credibility in the eyes of future employers. Seventy-one percent of Europeans believed that the maximum number of organisations an executive could work for in a ten-year period without being labeled a ‘serial job changer’ was two to three in total.”

Outlasting the leader

This rapid throughput at the management level creates a corporate culture where the default is “This, too, shall pass!” Don’t like this leader’s direction? Then wait it out a couple of years and he’ll be gone. Got a great idea? Not worth trying to change things with this leadership, the next boss will come in and change it all again anyway.

Contracting leadership lifecycles have also helped to establish a cult of personality-based leadership – showing yourself as the leadership hero, parachuted in from outside, whose declared mission is to fix this company – even if it isn’t broken.

Over time, with a series of these heroes arriving and departing in rapid succession, the workforce reaches stasis in the bottom half of the organisational pyramid. The aim is survival – they just get on with their jobs, do only what’s necessary and moan about whatever version of forced ranking performance measurement system that the ever-changing top half of the pyramid are using to try and enforce change and growth. Resentment can manifest itself with ironic, anonymous graffiti on notice boards that say, “The floggings will continue until morale improves!”

⁵ “Executives hold traditional values regarding job mobility and tenure,” www.onrec.com, Issue 119 - 31st August - 28th September. www.onrec.com, an online magazine for online recruitment around the world: <http://www.onrec.com/newsstories/18948.asp>.

New leadership paradigm

It's time for leadership to lose its clearly definable image – time for a new leadership paradigm. Call it invisible leadership, networked leadership, open-source leadership, crowd leadership; the name doesn't matter, but the concept does.

Future success will be generated by a leadership that is embedded in, and emanates from, the organisation. Success will come to organisations that develop a leadership without pomp and circumstance, without status, without a dependency on tenure.

The workforce of the recovered economy will demand a leadership with the flexibility to accommodate rapid change, with the agility to solve problems at source and avoid the delays and distractions of escalation, with responsibility and accountability spread to them throughout the organisation. The call will be for leadership that reflects the functional style of Wikipedia, eBay, YouTube and other community-based successes in the emerging business landscape.

To achieve this leadership needs to set a solid yet simple frame and then step back. With only an occasional light touch from its owners, the business of the organisation can then steer itself to its success.

Community-based leadership

Look behind any of the success stories that are mentioned above, and you'll discover this community-based framework in action. Each organisation had this framework at its heart and uses it to function on both a strategic and an operational level.

Elements that are common to all these business communities are Cause, Community, Compliance and Conversation. Here's why these are the vital components for their success, and why you should look at them in regard to your own success.

1. **Cause:** The driving force is a “raison d'être” statement that defines the community's Primary Purpose in a way that enables, allows and encourages each member of the community to judge whether their efforts and decisions add value to the organisations overall endeavors.

Each of the organisations mentioned is transparent about why it exists and what it intends to do. Simple statements such as “to provide a global trading platform where practically anyone can trade practically anything” (eBay), “to empower and engage people around the world to collect and develop educational content under a free license or in the public domain, and to disseminate it effectively and globally” (Wikipedia), and “to provide fast and easy video access and the ability to share videos frequently” (YouTube).

Note the unrestricted nature of these purpose aspirations, the freedom they signal to their communities to explore means to achieve success. Look again at your collection of purpose statements or your vision, mission and corporate goal sentences. Do they encourage freedom or do they constrain your peoples' efforts?

2. Community: Each has a broad and evolving Platform of People that forms the network of the community that invites membership, participation and contribution.

Each entry submitted to Wikipedia or YouTube, each transaction executed on eBay confirms the basic tenets of that community. It would be rare to find a person who has made only one entry into Wikipedia, a person who has posted a single video on YouTube or a person who has bought or sold just one item on eBay. The success of the first interaction with the community encourages multiple interactions and thus the formation of the community.

Do your people feel the same sense of adding value to your organisational “community” when they interact with it? Are they encouraged enough by the experience of doing something well to do it again? And then to do it again and again? If they take a decision local to their own work, is that valued by the organisation? How do they know that it is? It won’t be enough to just talk at the top about these things, the workforce will need and look for tangible evidence that there is personal satisfaction in being decisive, being engaged in organisational aspirations, leading the organisation to success through individual efforts.

3. Compliance: To add to peoples’ freedom to think and act independently in pursuit of a collective wider purpose, organisations need a clear and workable set of Parameters of Performance. These parameters set guidelines for making and executing devolved decisions. Think of them as the rules of the road in that they neither define a destination, nor do they prescribe a route; but rather they lay out simple behaviours to be observed by individuals when travelling through the organisation’s landscape.

Although they provide reference points to assist the individual in making sensible decisions along the way, they leave the specifics of those decisions to the individual. They allow individuals to ask themselves “If I perform this way am I adding to the wider purpose?” and “If I decide to do this, will I comply with the wider organisational purpose?”

4. Conversation: The fourth element of the framework is perhaps the hardest for traditional organisations to adopt. Positive Policing is the approach of the originators of the community that intends to provide help not harassment.

Like the local cop who is there to answer questions, make suggestions, and support the community rather than hand out speeding tickets, leaders of these successful organisations demonstrate affirmation and positive reinforcement of appropriate behaviour within the community. Criticism or punishment of “inappropriate” action does exist but is kept to a minimum and dealt with quietly and personally. The focus is on self-discipline of the individual who takes guidance for behaviour from an understanding of the community’s expectations, the personal advantages of community membership and the desire to be an appreciated member of that community.

Emphasis on these concepts constitutes positive policing – where is this happening in your organisation? Do you know how people measure their perception of the personal advantages of membership in your organisation? Are you providing them with the professional space for their self-motivation to be realised, or does your “policing” of their work inhibit their ability to take a personal role in leading the organisation to success?

Changing mind sets

The opportunity to restructure an existing organisation, with a traditional Leader-driven hierarchy may not be available to you as it's carved in stone by the rigidity of the ubiquitous organisational chart. But I'm offering you an alternative to the classic organisation change, one that suggests a simple yet effective mind-set change.

Within classic structures those people charged formally with the task and responsibility of leading can adjust their attitude and behaviours to take advantage of these changing times. Jeff Howe writes that "companies are increasingly taking advantage of a global populace that's getting more intelligent and more productive"⁶. If you want to join this trend and be successful in the future, then here are some immediate actions you can take:

1. Let go! Be admired for how little leadership you are seen to exert. Revel in the successes of those who, on the organisational chart, report to you. Be the one who identifies and celebrates individual acts and behaviours that add value among your professional community. Give others the credit when they have earned it, and they will soon become comfortable in giving you the credit for the opportunity to succeed that you created for them.
2. Abandon "explain and enforce" and adopt "enable and encourage." The first white paper⁷ in this series looked at verbs and separated them into those used by a Manager and those used by a Leader. As we move out of these turbulent times, the ideal is no longer a flexible combination of these two verb categories, where managers who do a good job of explaining and then enforcing should do a little better in enabling and encouraging.

This will not be good enough to lead the emerging workforce combination of Baby Boomers and Gen-Yers.⁸ Now it's only "enable and encourage" that will generate the required response in terms of employee productivity and corporate success. Stop explaining. Stop enforcing. They get it! They want to do it! Let them. Give them the framework that enables their personal success within the wider organisational purpose and encourage them to exploit it. Their intelligence, energy and motivation will do the rest.

Setting a precedent

A prime example of this leadership model could be seen during a recent American TV special. The NBC network took its viewers inside the White House where the cameras – and there were 32 film units at work for the two days – showed a hive of decision-making and action.

⁶ Jeff Howe: Crowdsourcing.net: http://crowdsourcing.typepad.com/cs/2006/05/hi_my_name_is_j.html.

⁷ See White Paper 1 "On Crisis Leadership". If you would like a copy, please send an email to david.ward@wardconsultants.com.

⁸ See White Paper 3 "Are you answering your ducks when they quack?" If you would like a copy, please send an email to david.ward@wardconsultants.com.

One revelation was how many young people, who had worked tirelessly on the election campaign, were now in positions of key responsibility. The President and his close leadership team granted them professional space they needed in order for them to get things done.

In one memorable moment, much was made of the President's leaving the White House to go to a local burger place to get burgers for everyone, including NBC's anchorman for the program. The President went from office to office asking his 24- and 25-year-old staffers how they wanted their burgers. Then when he came back to the White House, he also handed out the burgers to each staffer.

Was this a staged moment for the camera? Perhaps, though the President appeared to know quite a few of his team's burger preferences, which suggested he had done this before. Was this a symbolic moment? Absolutely!

The message was clear – it was as if he were saying, “You guys get on with doing what you know you need to do to meet our wider purpose, the one I defined at the outset of our journey; and I'll do what I know I need to do to support you as you do that.”

So we have come full circle. The power of the new leadership paradigm can be summed up with this command: “Lead on – I'm right behind you...with the burgers!”