



The Twenty First Century Organisation: Are you ready?

Organisations continually reshape to deliver business goals, remain competitive and respond to their constantly changing business environment. But do staff have the skills needed to be successful in the twenty first century? Business experts repeatedly tell us that the UK does not have the leadership skills needed to be competitive in a global market. So what is to be done?

Whilst many have debated that we can't all be leaders, there is increasing focus on changing the leadership landscape to look at trust, authenticity, empathy and collaboration. Rosemary Bennett's article "workers urged to fulfil their followership potential" suggests that, increasingly, organisations are looking at how to empower their employees to take an active part in the decision making and not just blindly follow the decisions of the leader.

Some have looked to define the different types of followers.

- Followers not engaged with their organisation or task and who do not apply independent critical thinking are **passive followers**. These individuals require constant motivation and direction and, consequently, can be a drain on the leader and the team.
- Those supporting the task and motivated but not critically appraising what they do are **conformist followers**. They will always support the team leader and may work hard but they do not consider alternate options and may not make decisions without guidance from the leader.
- **Alienated followers** have high levels of critical thinking but are disengaged from their organisation and task. These usually come across as sceptical or cynical. When the leader, or team, tries to move forward they will voice the reasons why not. They may have good ideas but do not put these forward. Indeed, they may be negative and undermine the group.

References:

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- The **exemplary follower** applies constructive critical thinking and interacts with the group and the leader. If they agree with the current course of action, they will back the leader 100%. Alternatively, if they disagree, they will challenge the leader, offering constructive alternatives to help the leader and organisation achieve their aims.

In reality some people move between the boxes in their followership style over the duration of a task.

But the responsibility for successful leadership lies with the organisation and its leaders, rather than staff who are the followers. Leaders will need to create a climate of trust and openness, engaging their staff at an emotional as well as rational level, being prepared to take risks in the implementation of their ideas. But how easy is that?

A London Business School article suggests that although research supports a new approach to leadership, based on understanding and improving culture and teamwork in teams and units, there has been a relatively slow adoption of this enlightened leadership approach. The article suggests that this may be because organisations have simply bolted on elements of employee engagement, peer mentoring or emotional intelligence to a "command and control" culture, without really examining the deeply ingrained habits that undermine engagement and performance.

In addition, there is currently a buzz around iconoclastic leadership, where no boundaries are imposed on employees. The new leader needs to understand the true concept of facilitation and coaching by encouraging ideas from employees, with a genuinely open mind, being prepared to consider all options and ideas, and with no preconceived notions.

So with so many worthwhile concepts around, what actions should the HR function be taking?

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It is hardly surprising that when we see so much debate around leadership and little agreement on how to achieve it, that “doing the right thing” is not as straightforward as it would seem.

To achieve successful leadership a 21st century organisation will require an empowered culture. But there is a need to consider how social changes such as “followership” and “iconoclastic leadership” could provide a competitive edge and deliver the potential benefits. Organisations need structure to enable effective working. If workers challenge every idea tabled, decisions would never be made. With the follower, the responsibility is to challenge, question, improve and share opinions and ideas. With the leader, the responsibility is to hold accountability for risks taken, evaluate risks and ideas, and create an engaging and stimulating environment in which staff can contribute fully.

It may be worth considering that all good leaders were once good followers and many of our organisations’ current “foot soldiers” will be the leaders of tomorrow. Developing individuals that have the right role models as well as the right leaders is critical to achieving a positive organisational culture.

The new approach to leadership requires the emotional intelligence to engage others and engender creativity, the intellectual agility to understand markets and predict trends, and the resilience to withstand incredible challenge in a volatile and often hostile environment.

However such leaders are rare, and require coaching, support and ‘vertical development’, or the ability to continually move beyond ‘expert’ level to absorb new skills and achieve genuine personal growth. Good learning and development interventions will support individuals to achieve this.

As L&D professionals we need to continually seek out and test new ways of giving staff the skills and knowledge to perform successfully in their roles, whether it is for a new graduate entrant or a member of the executive team.

With the right support and training, the potential for dramatically increased productivity, morale and innovation is clear. We should

avoid the temptation to achieve the shift to more facilitative and non-directive styles of management too quickly. For managers, programmed to rescue, nurture and direct, rapid removal of these structures is likely to create role confusion, loss of confidence and inconsistency. For staff, unused to offering opinion or challenging the status quo, this may lead to inadequately weighed risk-taking, withdrawal or loss of confidence. The transition for all concerned must be managed as carefully as any major change and development programme.

The pre-requisites for a twenty first century leader will be skills such as:

- empathy - the ability to know and manage oneself, seeking feedback, understanding one’s own values and achieving a level of personal alignment and control;
- connectedness – the ability to communicate one’s own position authentically and with passion, so as to engage others at an emotional as well as rational level;
- authenticity - the recognition that some situations will need to be managed with courage and resilience, with a clear eye on the need for governance, and consideration of what is negotiable with regard to the achievement of goals, strategy and organisational values;

The new leader for the twenty first century needs to be collaborative, sharing resources and knowledge generously for all to win, and delivering positive conflict management.

To achieve this leadership style for your organisation requires learning interventions designed and implemented with this objective in mind. But how many L&D professionals are thinking in this visionary way?

If you would like to know more about Asesoría’s work with clients on Leadership, please contact Melissa Kittermaster on 020 3053 8630. If you would like a copy of future thought papers, please contact clare.hunter@asesoria-group.com to be added to our mailing list.