



FOCUS ARTICLE

Leadership Is Not a Spectator Sport

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As a leader, you are integral to and embedded in your team. This means that your actions, your priorities, the questions you ask and the behaviors you reinforce shape your organization's culture. Understanding your role is key to reaching goals and guiding transformation.

The secrets of effective leadership may not be what you think. In fact, one of the lessons we can learn from the most successful leaders is that what you think is almost always up for revision. When you realize your role places you in the thick of things, as the team's trainer, for instance, or the ship's captain, and not above the fray, you quickly learn the value of full engagement balanced with trust in your team members. Like a winning sports coach, good leaders jump in at the right moment, asking the right questions, getting clarification and reassuring the team. Just as importantly, they know when to jump back out and let the team lead, buoyed by the "trainer's" trust, inspiration and support.

Culture Eats Strategy for Breakfast

It's natural for leaders to have big ideas about how to reach goals, hit targets, improve performance figures and the like. Often

focusing on the numbers and promoting new initiatives is how they got their jobs. But however fine-tuned the strategy, if the culture isn't healthy enough to support it, the effort is doomed. This means that establishing a strong, positive organizational culture is far from an auxiliary feature or nice-to-have ornament, it is, rather, the foundation that sets you and your team up for success or failure.

In fact, your culture is your brand – never doubt this. Apple, Google and Facebook are prime examples of companies whose culture is as familiar to the public as their brand. Their success stories result, in part, from this strength, which consolidates their market dominance and attracts the most promising talent to their workforce—an enviable position by any measure.

But how do we address culture? Where do we begin when it permeates every aspect of the organization? A good starting point is to **clarify core values**—the simpler, the better. This involves

identifying a common purpose, one that breaks down silos and unites everyone behind it, answering the question, “What are we here for?” This common denominator transcends short-term goals or department-specific concerns to capture the most fundamental premise of the organization’s work. For a safety-oriented company like DEKRA, it might be, for example, “life matters.”

Once the core value is clear, the next step is to reinforce the organization’s vision so that it touches every project and every client the organization takes on. The central question here is “Where are we going and why?” Armed with these questions and their answers, individuals can rely on them when making hard decisions or having tough conversations. In this sense, **clear values and a vision** empower employees to trust each other and themselves—especially when leaders place their trust in the team and rely on the company’s values and vision to guide their own priorities, behaviors and decision-making.



Rethinking Feedback

Establishing a positive culture involves asking questions to clarify an organization’s central tenets, but the questions don’t stop there. As an organization works to align conversations with their values and vision, asking questions remains a powerful tool for learning and enhancing communication. Not only should leaders favor asking over assuming, employees at every level should be encouraged both to ask and answer questions freely. Imagine the difference it would make to replace so-called feedback with an invitation to assess outcomes and performance together. What seems like a simple shift removes blame and shame from the conversation and channels the energy into learning and improving.



Figure 1. Six steps for good leadership

One of the greatest privileges of my career has been the opportunity to witness Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II in a working capacity. She is nearly universally admired and has weathered many crises in the course of her reign. How has this epic leader gained so much respect? She asks questions, a lot of questions! Having observed this first-hand, it is clear that when she asks a question of anyone, regardless of age or stature, everyone listens and respects both the question and what drives it: a genuine interest and willingness to understand more. Asking questions, absorbing others’ expertise and experiences and then sharing what she has learned has been central to her success as a leader.

A ship’s captain, to cite another example from my own experience, has to know and understand every aspect of the vessel they are in charge of, including its crew and purpose. Since such a vessel is effectively a floating, self-supporting village, it is impossible for a single person to master all the expertise required. What makes the captain effective is having trust in the crew, asking the right questions, enabling others and engaging with them in order to make good decisions. Returning to the sports analogy, the coach is “playing the field” alongside the team, not shouting from the stands as a spectator. A valued leader is only as effective as their team. This approach is applicable to work with clients as well, where asking the right questions and really hearing the answers can help an organization deliver exactly what the client needs. It encourages a more dynamic exchange capable of undercutting unhelpful assumptions and can lead to deeper engagement. For example, an organization that has strong interdepartmental communication is in a position to broaden its offerings to clients who may benefit from more than one product or service. It takes **good leadership** to model this type of communication and to start by asking questions and allowing others to come up with the answers—even, or especially, unexpected ones.

When effective leaders see these important shifts happening—values-driven behaviors, meaningful conversations, tough decision-making—it's essential to acknowledge them. A primary leadership role is to emphasize successes, to let your team members know they've been seen and that their contributions are valued. This is the key to sustaining the positive momentum you've gained.

Are Things Changing or Are They Transforming?

We'll conclude with this final question worth considering as leaders take stock of progress. The distinction between change and transformation is one of scale and depth. Changes can be made or occur with or without making a lasting or substantial impact. Transformation, on the other hand, is by definition more far-

reaching and consequential, and as such can be scary. In fact, fear can limit us to making small changes that keep us in our comfort zone and hinder true growth and improvement.

Lately, circumstances beyond the control of any one individual or organization have forced us to transform the way we work and do business, disrupting workplaces, travel, communication and supply chains. Our resilience and adaptability have demonstrated that transformation can, in fact, be alive with opportunity.

External challenges will continue to shape how we work, sometimes demanding sudden change. Leaders who understand that their role calls for active engagement will be ready to prepare their organizations by building a supportive, communicative culture. Together, they'll be well-positioned to embrace transformation and thrive.

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