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On the shoulders of giants

In the second of a two-part guide, **Patrick O'Brien** looks at the role active followers have to play in transformational leadership, and how leaders can help team members become future leaders

The concept of leadership is made up of three integrated ingredients. First, the business needs direction, so a leader constructs a sound vision to position for a changed tomorrow. Next, the vision needs to be shared, so they need to communicate with consistency and clarity to all stakeholders. Finally, communicated actions require execution, so a leader must develop their team to take the business forward.

The second part of this leadership article addresses this latter aspect; the need for a leader to facilitate personal growth within their team.

As Sir Isaac Newton once famously said: 'If I have seen a little further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.'

The relevance is that great transformational leaders get there, and stay there, precisely because they are able to stand on the shoulders of their 'giants' – their active followers.

That said, followers don't just arrive.

Let's consider some of the options and actions that a leader can take. As a result, this will allow them to strengthen the followership capabilities within their team, as they target transformational success.

Leaders are v what leaders do

For centuries, leaders were viewed by what they 'were'; their titles, roles, or positions. Around 100 years ago, Leaders began to be judged by what they 'had'; leaders were born with an inviolate set of traits, their DNA dominated.

About 60 years ago, what leaders 'did' became more important; their behaviours and styles, their actions and interactions with others. With this action-oriented perspective, performance was driven by small

changes a leader made in areas they controlled.

About 30 years ago, the focus enlarged to include the context within which leadership took place, the 'where'. Where situations changed, leadership effectiveness was determined by how they dealt with those differing situations. An effective approach in one context may not be effective in another; choice was contingent upon the prevailing situation.

The contemporary view is that of the transformational leader, where performance is impacted by a combination of leader, team and follower. This allows a leader to positively contribute to the development of followership capabilities within their team, through reflection and expression.

In the rest of this article, we will stress the importance and power of modelling and look at four specific areas that a leader can focus on.

Followers watch what leaders do

Everyone watches a leader. Some watch to see them succeed, others watch to see them fail. Regardless of outcome, they all watch. Therefore, one of the most powerful tools a leader has at their disposal is the time and attention that people indirectly pay them.

Constant observation of a leader's actions is a vicarious form of training and development. By demonstrating appropriate behaviours, a leader can make this training work for them, or against them.

So, a leader needs to be mindful of how their actions are perceived by others. Next, they need to take positive steps to model the right behaviours. Finally, to help develop followers into future leaders, a leader can choose

to explicitly model the following four behaviours.

Visions that bridge

Management focuses delivery on yesterday's promises, whereas leadership focuses on creating different tomorrows. Leaders thus create that bridge between certain today's, and more uncertain (yet brighter) tomorrows.

For followers to perform and grow, they need to see that gap bridged with a clear and cogent vision. They want to see line of sight from where they currently are, to where in future their leader needs them to be.

The leader provides the vision to align their team with organisational aspirations and values. Visions signal change, though change can be a harbinger of fear.

The leader ensures the vision builds strong foundations each side of the bridge, and that the benefits and risks of stepping forward are both considered, and captivating, for their followers.

An effective leader builds strong visions that directly help followers to bridge the divide, and indirectly, signals the importance of developing look-ahead skills.

Communications that engage

Charisma and superb oratory skills were important in the successful election of President Obama in 2009. That said, followers are realistic, they don't need leaders to constantly talk like a US president.

Rather, they want leaders to engage with them in plain, open, honest dialogue.

They want communication in simple words that they can understand. They want leaders to tell them the vision

'IF I HAVE SEEN A LITTLE FURTHER, IT IS BY STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS'

SIR ISSAC NEWTON

with clarity, they want leaders to listen to their feedback and concerns, and, they want to be part of a leader–follower relationship built on a solid platform of trust.

An effective leader stops pointing, scolding and shouting, and starts talking, inviting and listening. They take the business forward positively and signal the importance of building strong relationships.

Distances that resonate

'Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall!' said President Reagan, firmly instructing the Russian president on the steps of the Brandenburg Gate in 1987. His words captured distance, yet concealed the closeness of friendships built while working together to warm their Cold War relationship.

Thirty years on in 2010, the resetting of US–Russia relationships continues. Closeness and distance are again visible over shared lunches, such as that between Obama and Russian president Dmitry Medvedev in a Washington hamburger bar, and spy scandals in the media.

Effective leadership requires leaders to manage and signal distance. In setting direction, giving instruction, or pointing pathways to the future, good leaders know how to inject distance

into the relationship. However, when coaching and helping followers to execute on the vision, good leaders also know how to inject closeness.

An effective leader conveys appropriate distance that lets a follower clearly see when actions are directive, or consultative. They also minimise the potential for confusion, and at the same time, maximise the opportunity to develop subtle soft skills in people management.

Emotions that engage

Daniel Goleman brought emotional intelligence (EQ) to our attention, and research suggests that leadership success is differentiated more by EQ, than IQ.

That said, old dialectics of task v team, or results v relationships, still stress rationality over emotions.

Followers have social needs to operate inside trusting relationships, built by emotional engagement. Successful leaders know that emotions stoke the fires of the passions that burn within all their team, and accept their role in forging those engaging emotions.

Engagement means the leader sheds their total reliance on rationality, comes to understand the importance of emotions, and, becomes aware of

their emotions reflected in others. In doing so, a leader enables better management of their follower interactions, in more engaging ways.

An effective leader engages followers on an emotional level, and so builds the bonds of trusting relationships. They let followers take up the challenge energetically, and inspire them to pay those positive emotions forward to their own team.

In closing

Great leadership is born from teams that know where they are headed, and, have the freedom to dialogue in appropriate ways.

Great teams are made up of fantastic followers, active, keen and eager to support their leader and team in achieving the mission.

As a leader, recognise the close attention that people pay to your actions. Seize that opportunity, and choose to make changes to your leadership approach, to develop the right kind of followership within your team.

Adopt and adapt the ideas, and see how you can make them work for you.

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