An Executive Guide to giving Leadership Advice

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As a chief executive, C suite director or senior manager, what advice would you give to help your leaders succeed in today's corporate world?

Senior leaders – like you - are often asked to speak on leadership and they will listen to your story.

Always remember the timeless qualities - like courage, humility, service and integrity - do not give up on those.

But the real issue for your leaders is what's different about 'now'?

Address what's Different **About 'Now'**

There are new features in the leadership landscape and your advice needs to address them head on.

The most important are:

- Drive for economic recovery
- Higher expectations of stakeholders at work, at home and in the community
- Proliferation of web-based, knowledge-rich professional and social networks
- Advances in knowing what drives human performance at work

There may be more. But these are the ones that shape my perspective.

For me, they offer executives like you, **Seven Leadership Lessons** to impart to those who look to you for advice.

Here they are. Choose the ones that are relevant and build them into your leadership speech.

1. Leadership is still about

Results

Good leadership has never been about results *at any price*. But if leaders stumble in achieving their objectives, they ultimately fail. That's why leadership is still about the ability to achieve results.

It's the right place to start. But it needs refining for the pressures and priorities of our time.

The ability to deliver financial results justifies itself in the present climate. But your leaders' world is more demanding. Everyone wants you for something – customers, suppliers, business partners, your boss, your team, your community, your family and other loved ones. You play a part in all their lives and understandably, they all want something from you.

In today's world, all your stakeholders' needs feel more legitimate, reasonable and fair. The rise of corporate social responsibility has made our duty to society and the environment a statutory requirement and our duty of care to your staff and their families more than a passing reference. As leaders, we are expected to respond to them all.

We have to create value for our customers, our teams, our organizations, our families, our communities and our profession - at the same time. It's not easy to get the balance right!

Take a look at this definition:

Definition 1: *Leadership is the ability to create and deliver value for all your stakeholders.*

Now, take the idea a little further. A good leader knows the people they lead face the same challenge. So, the definition should be extended:

Definition 2: *Leadership is the ability to help others create and deliver value for all their stakeholders*

In practice, we have to know how to help our teams satisfy the expectations of *their* stakeholders.

This is the 'servant leader's' definition of leadership and it starts with questions like these:

- *Who am I leading?*
- *Who are their stakeholders?*
- *What do those stakeholders expect from the people I lead?*
- *How will they measure our success?*

- *How can I help the people I lead exceed their stakeholders' expectations?*

Around each employee in your team, there is a web of stakeholder expectations. In today's world, your leadership is about helping your teams ensure those expectations are met, as well as attending to your own.

This is the first leadership lesson. It illuminates our first priority – to deliver results - by showing that we have a leadership duty to assist our people in meeting the expectations of all the stakeholders who are depending on them.

So today, successful leaders should be asking:

- *How am I helping my team serve their customers better?*
- *How am I helping my team reduce their costs?*
- *How am I helping my team add value to their professional network?*
- *How am I helping my team get to their child's sports day?*
- *How am I helping my team serve the community to which they belong?*

The leadership lesson illuminates our need to satisfy the rising expectations of all our stakeholders and help our teams do the same for all of theirs'.

2. Only this time it's **Personal**

Remember mass customization? The corporate drive to make global products suit personal preferences?

It's the global coffee brand you can have just the way you want. It's the personalized laptop, TV schedule or holiday package.

Suppliers know the cost of customization is outweighed by the long-term value of customer loyalty. Personalization is a competitive advantage.

As consumers experience the delight of options and features that let them make it 'mine', our employees expect work flexibility to suit who they are.

My question then, is how our leadership can incorporate the advantages of mass customization.

New leadership theories abound. But few of them say: 'If you want this to work, you must personalise it by asking the people you lead how *they* want you to act.'

Personalized leadership? Employee-centred leadership? Yes, of course. That's what people expect these days and it's true, some of you are already very good at it.

This is not just 'soft stuff'. There is a strong business argument for personalized leadership. Have you seen the research on employee engagement?

In public service and commercial sector organizations, there is a causal link between employee engagement, customer satisfaction and stakeholder satisfaction. When employees are highly engaged customer retention, sales and profitability improve.

Research also shows that today, employees *want* to be engaged; that they *want* to add value in organizations that want to make a difference and that they value more the leaders and organizations that notice and respond to them individually.

It supports the argument that personalized leadership is good for business.

Like global products that are personalized to engage us in our world as consumers, global leadership models need to be personalized if we have a hope of engaging our employees.

As this happens, leadership becomes massively diverse. In today's world, there is a shift from singular leadership ideas in favour of a plurality of leadership practice - from a monolithic leadership culture to a thoroughly cosmopolitan one.

Yes, speak to your teams as one, but know that great leadership is really 'one person at a time'.

3. It's in the hidden value of **Relationships**

More than ever before, we are immersed in freely available information, news, knowledge, expertise and entertainment via websites, blogs, tweets, TV, radio, books, magazines, podcasts and more. It's global and local, rich, fast, diverse and increasingly targeted to individual interests and habits.

Bringing it all together is the surge in web-based, professional and social networking.

Faced with a novel question or a complex challenge, we combine what we already know with what we can find 'out there'.

Our minds are not just in our heads but in the intelligent network of our social relationships.
Put simply, the great cultural anthropologist Gregory Bateson said, 'mind is social'. And, wow, how that social, networked mind has grown!

At work we simply cannot see the fantastic, value-rich network of relationships around the people in our teams. But it's there all right and it's an amazing resource for answering questions, solving problems and improving performance.

So, what does this mean for the way we lead?

It means the performance and the potential of your team is far from limited to the experience, knowledge and skills they brought with them – it includes the hidden value of their knowledge-rich network of relationships, as well.

These networks are a new source of competitive advantage.

Before long, we will be adding new questions at selection interviews:

- *Professionally, how well networked are you?*
- *What additional value can your network bring to this role?*
- *Describe a challenge you resolved successfully using the added value of your professional network?*

In future, the value in your teams' professional networks will be a decisive factor in individual performance and team productivity.

As the networked world proliferates, we need to be increasingly curious about the value of professional networks in our teams. But despite its value, your teams may not be open to sharing that personally valuable resource.

As a source of expertise, professional networks are a source of power and influence. Sharing your network requires a balanced judgment between the value of collaboration and the value of 'what's in it for me'.

Potentially, the greater the value of the network, the more your team members might expect in return for sharing it. In this world, the power dynamic between our teams and us flattens out.

In this world, leadership by command and control just doesn't work.

We have to adjust. In knowledge-dependent functions (and there are more and more of those), intelligent professional networks enable your team members to work with more autonomy. At the same time, they can increase the productivity of teams willing to share the resource for our common goal.

There are two implications.

First, we need to learn how to take advantage of the increasing value of those hidden networks that we are connected to.

Second, we need to learn how to encourage our teams to openly share their networks with each other. And since we can't do that by relying on our positional authority, we have to earn respect and build trust on a much more equal footing.

This leadership lesson brings the value of hidden relationships into the open and in so doing, it calls on us to learn more about how to leverage networks for better performance.

Just as important, the value in these networks makes our relationship with our teams even less hierarchical, emphasising the need we all have to develop a new generation of more sophisticated, collaborative leadership skills.

4. Leadership is about…
'What can we do for each other?'

Leadership was never as crude as 'What can you do for me?'

Nor was servant leadership ever meant to be as unbalanced as 'What can I do for you?' although I firmly believe good leadership starts with that question.

Today, our leadership must be about 'What can we do for each other?' in pursuit of our shared vision.

We should be answering the question in our annual performance management cycle. But the spirit and quality of those conversations varies considerably.

You may feel caught between the corporate cascade of performance targets and your team's need for involvement, motivation and engagement.

But consider this: today, our employee's precious resources – their talent, discretionary effort, network of relationships etc – are more critical to realising our vision than ever before.

For this reason, leadership has to become more *reciprocal* – more two-way - than ever.

As leaders, if we accept the causal link between employee engagement, discretionary effort and team productivity, then we must change our behaviour to embrace the question, 'What can we do for each other?'

In today's world, there is a performance advantage in leadership behaviour based on reciprocity and collaboration in pursuit of a common goal.

That's why, 'What can we do for each other?' is the fourth leadership lesson.

5. Leadership is in the… **Art of Conversation**

Everything we do is mediated through language.

Proposals, plans, ideas and presentations; messages, briefings, meetings and speeches; strategies, values, brands and annual reports – all of them are expressed in words, phrases, sentences and stories.

There is a qualitative difference between the written word and the spoken word. Each has its place. But when it comes to the task of leadership, our ability to speak well, to capture the attention and connect with the hearts, minds and motivations of others, rests so much more on what we say and how we talk than on what we write down.

We know leaders who are great orators capable of capturing the attention of hundreds or thousands of people. There is a definite skill in that but it's a small number of leaders who speak on such a large scale. The majority of us talk very, very frequently to small numbers of people and it's almost always a conversation, rarely a speech.

These conversations are pivotal moments.

They can make or break an idea, they can build or erode a relationship and they can enhance or damage a reputation.

And yet, whoever trained you in the art of making a good conversation?

No one, probably.

It's remarkable. If there was ever something so obvious that we have failed to 'see', it has to be the ability to hold good, productive conversations.

So, where should we start?

Well, because conversations require the good use of words, phrases, sentences and so on, a helpful starting point is to recognise the missing skill as one of 'authorship'.

Let me explain what I mean.

Leaders *author* their conversations and since they are dialogic by nature, authoring what you say has to be effective 'in the moment', at the time of speaking and meaningful in response to whatever else is being said. It's not easy – but it's very important.

As leaders, we have to be effective in a number of 'set piece' conversations:

The 1 to 1
- You with your boss
- You with your team

The Team Meeting
- You chairing as a team leader
- You attending as a team member

The Presentation for Approval
- You presenting plans and ideas
- You responding to plans and ideas

The Unplanned Corridor Conversation
- You with your boss
- You with your team

These are eight pivotal moments in which your success depends on conversational excellence. And like everything else, conversational excellence can be developed.

My advice to you therefore is to become aware of your conversations, to notice what makes one 'good' and in particular, to understand your role as a practical author of conversations that connect, engage and motivate your teams to perform and succeed.

This leadership lesson reveals a new dimension for the current age. In its broadest sense, 'leadership as authorship' tunes us in to the creative task of planned eloquence in everything we say and write. In a narrower sense, it illuminates the leader's role as a practical author of good quality, productive conversations.

So much hangs on our ability to hold good conversation, I would like to see a rise in the value we place on it.

In short, make your conversations count.

Try this:

- Choose the right moment
- Talk their language
- Ask questions and listen
- Offer something valuable and relevant
- Clarify an exchange and reach agreement
- Check understanding
- Follow up on what you agreed
- Learn and adapt

We have always had to be good at making conversation.

But as with all our human skills, the time has come for us to be conscious of this one – in order that we can just get better at making every conversation count.

6. Leadership is in the…
Power to Learn

It is very compelling to read the research that suggests our ability to learn is the most powerful indicator of leadership potential.

In essence, it says successful people are simply better learners.

We should start with ourselves, 'If we want to succeed we need to know how to learn'.

The truth is, we think about performance more than we think about learning. So let's stop and consider learning for a moment.

In today's world, with an abundance of information presented via all kinds of media, it seems sensible that we should know how to adapt and change by learning.

But what does it involve? Ask yourself:

- *Do you really get beneath the surface of things?*
- *Do you make connections and see that learning 'matters to me'?*
- *Do you show risk-taking, playfulness, imagination and intuition?*
- *Do you learn with and from others as well as being able to learn alone?*

As leaders, we should all be highly effective learners and if we can't say 'Yes' to questions like these, it's something we need to work on.

This lesson illuminates the need to develop and use our ability to learn.

It also tells us that in leading others, one of the most helpful things we can do for our teams is to challenge and develop their curiosity, their meaning making and the quality of their learning relationships.

Try asking the questions of the teams you lead to provoke an interest in learning that could benefit us all.

7. Leadership is about…
Intrinsic Motivation

No matter how talented you are or what is expected of you, whatever motivates you from the inside will ultimately determine what you do, how hard you try and how far you succeed.

Such is the pervasive influence of intrinsic motivation.

It's the basic driver of human effort and the power that makes people 'go!'

Dan Pink – read his book, Drive - has done us a great service by bringing the importance of intrinsic motivation to our attention.

We all have ideas that excite us professionally and work goals we want to achieve. We are fortunate in our economy that professional life is a vehicle for realising these dreams.

The trick lies in discovering what those ambitions and aspirations are, aligning them to the work that needs to be done and ensuring they add value that other people want.

But think about it for a moment: intrinsic motivation has always been the source of better ideas, worthwhile improvements and better results.

Human achievements start with imagination, curiosity, experimentation, desire and the drive to see good things brought to fruition.

It's always been that way, it's just that we haven't yet consciously formalised it as part of 'the way we work'.

But I firmly believe its time has now come.

There are two implications.

One, as leaders, we need to know what truly motivates us from the inside and make it as central as we can to the work we need to do. Our contribution will be more enriching for our organization and more fulfilling for ourselves.

Two, we need to work with our teams to assist them in discovering what intrinsically motivates them professionally and align their interests and aspirations to value-adding activities at work.

It may sound like a utopian ideal – but all high aspirations start that way. There are many business advantages in making small, step-by-step adjustments to move in this direction.

Not least, it would make a positive impact on the value chain of job satisfaction, employee engagement, discretionary effort, productivity and performance.

It is also a remarkably good way of ameliorating the effects of work-related stress. A climate that encourages our staff to thrive doing work they enjoy is one of the main strategies for creating an environment that promotes wellbeing at work – and the rising cost of absence supports the business case for doing it for these reasons.

This leadership lesson shows the advantage of using everyone's motivation as a powerful source of innovation, engagement, effort and improvement.

You need to learn quickly how to discover it in others as well as in yourselves and you must use every creative effort to align it effectively to the work that has to be done.

In future, we will look back and stare with surprise at how long it took us to realise that employee performance at work is optimised when the chance to achieve a goal or fulfil an aspiration is given to every employee.

Human motivation – it's the untapped source of corporate achievement.

But not for long.

In Summary

Senior leaders are called upon – and willingly volunteer – to give leadership advice.

Your message will be enriched with anecdotes from your own experience and your audience will love to hear your story.

Leadership is about 'now', too and in this article I'm offering you some ideas to go alongside your own that feel relevant to the world we are leading in today.

I sincerely hope you find them useful and of benefit to those who look to you for advice – they will hang on your every word!

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