LEADING FROM THE MIDDLE.

Checklist 041

INTRODUCTION

Good leadership is vital for any organisation, but leadership is not just about having a formal position, it is about inspiring and enabling others to perform well and achieve objectives. Leadership is not just about status and authority, it is more about a mindset which thinks proactively and takes responsibility. Employees at all levels can play an active part in leading themselves and their organisations. Think back over your experience of organisational life and you may well recall people who have provided a lead for others, despite having little formal authority.

Managers in the middle of an organisation face particular challenges in exercising leadership. They have to find the right balance between leading and being led and between being a leader and a follower. They may face conflicting pressures from those they manage and those in more senior positions. In certain circumstances, they may be leading a cross-functional team with members from different parts of the organisation or a virtual team with members based in different locations.

It has been said that you will never lead anyone unless you first lead yourself. So, it's important for anyone who wants to be seen as a leader to start by reflecting on their own abilities and to work at developing the skills they need to handle workplace relationships and to influence others. This may involve personal development activities and/or participation in organisational leadership development programmes, where these are available.

This checklist offers some practical guidance for managers, focusing on fundamental leadership skills. Leaders are seen as those who:

› make followers feel well-supported, and can be trusted and relied upon by team members
› have a clear vision for the future and can lead the way through change
› show commitment to, and generate enthusiasm for, the organisation
› are honest and open, and spend time talking and listening to their people
› give employees the room and the confidence to get their job done.

DEFINITION

There is no commonly agreed definition for leadership, but a suggested one is: the capacity to establish direction, to influence and align others towards a common goal, to motivate and commit others to action, and to encourage them to feel responsible for and committed to their contribution to the organisation.

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1.   Think about the difference between management and leadership

There is an ongoing debate about the nature of management and leadership, and the difference between them. While some schools of thought emphasise the distinctions between them, other thinkers such as Henry Mintzberg suggest that in practice it is difficult to say when a person is 'managing' and when they are 'leading. A common approach to the difference is that:

› management is about the day-to-day running of a function, with a focus on task achievement, project implementation and processes for getting the job done

› leadership is about creating a sense of vision, common purpose and strategic direction, with a focus on inspiring people and gaining their commitment to the long-term effectiveness and success of the organisation.

Most would agree, however, that managers need leadership skills and abilities and that leadership can be an important part of their role. So, take the time to read around the subject and think out your own approach to leadership.

2.   Reflect on your current situation

Self-awareness is a vital starting point for the development of leadership capabilities. Having gained a clearer picture of what leadership is all about, now focus on yourself and your performance in your current role. Check your job description and consider the extent to which it expects or allows you to demonstrate leadership abilities. It may be that you have been promoted into a management role because of your technical skills and abilities, so that you now need to start focusing more on how you relate to, manage and lead your team.

Ask yourself questions such as:

› How do I see myself? How do others see me?
› What are my values and aspirations? What do I want to achieve?
› What are my strengths and weaknesses?
› How confident am I in taking responsibility and setting direction?
› Have I been able to create a sense of cohesion in my team?
› How effectively am I motivating and influencing others? Do I inspire confidence in others?
› Am I able to handle tensions and conflicts when they arise?

Remember that everyone can learn how to develop their leadership skills and potential.

3.   Downplay charisma

Charisma used to be seen as an important element in a leader's success, but its value is not taken as seriously today. Relying on personal charisma can be counterproductive, as it tends to dominate people, stifle creativity and create followers who depend on leaders for guidance and direction all the time, rather than use their own judgement. Organisations need employees who are empowered to make their own decisions within the boundaries of their authority, rather than employees who blindly follow the rules. Rather than focusing on their own personality or charismatic appeal, leaders need to develop a range of skills which will enable others to perform to the best of their ability and get the job done effectively.

4. Develop your personal leadership style

In the past, many leaders relied on autocratic 'command and control' styles. More recently there has been a much greater emphasis on more open and democratic styles such as transformational leadership, which seek to engage and persuade rather than coerce employees. Situational leadership theory has emphasized the need to adapt your personal style to the circumstances. You will need to develop your own style depending on your own personality and values and on the cultural norms of your organisation. You also need to be prepared to adapt your style to the people you work with and the situations you encounter. For example, a more directional style may be required where people are failing to take responsibility, but employees who lack confidence may benefit from a coaching style of leadership. Our checklist on understanding leadership styles provides further information (See Additional resources below.)

5. Set and communicate your values and priorities

The ability to define and communicate the values, principles and priorities which should direct all decisions is a key element of leadership. Creating a vision of where the team, department and organisation are going will help to create a sense of purpose and cohesion which will engage the abilities and potential of every individual and support long-term performance. Research into the attributes of good leaders suggests that they communicate well and that they communicate all the time. Develop a mix of communication channels to ensure that your messages are clearly received and understood by all. Encourage team members to communicate openly with you and demonstrate that you are willing to listen, respect their contributions and are open to suggestions for improvements.

6. Build up your personal leadership skills and behaviours

Remember that you will be seen as a role model by those you lead. Be prepared to lead from the front and are not asking people to do things you wouldn't be prepared to do yourself. Leadership attributes that will help you to gain the respect of those you lead include:

 › 'walking the talk' - always acting in accordance with the values you profess and expect from others
 › demonstrating integrity, professionalism and good work habits
 › understanding and valuing the contribution of team members
 › being accessible – and willing to listen to and learn from the views and perspectives of others
 › handling pressure in a reasonable and disciplined manner
 › welcoming commitment and enthusiasm
 › being open to suggestions and proposals
 › being prepared for change
 › providing regular feedback.

7. Work hard at empowering your staff

The leader's role is not to do all the work themselves, but to enable others to do it. But empowerment is not just a matter of delegating responsibilities. You will need to provide the support and help employees need to complete work assignments and grow in confidence in their abilities. Take care to create the environment and circumstances in which employees can take real ownership of their work. Are you courageous enough to trust your people to do a good job, and to show faith in them? If the answer is 'Yes' and you are able to do this at the same times as providing vision and guidance as needed, you will gain your team's confidence in you as a leader.

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Managers should avoid:

› behaving in a domineering way
› thinking that leaders have to come up with all the ideas - or are the only ones who have ideas
› relying on charisma
› refusing to listen to their staff

» **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

BOOKS

We are all leaders: leadership is not a position - it's a mindset, Fredrik Arnander
Chichester: Capstone, 2013

John Adair's 100 greatest ideas for effective leadership, John Adair
Chichester: Capstone, 2011

A manager's guide to leadership, 2nd ed, Mike Pedler, John Burgoyne and Tom Boydell
London: McGraw-Hill, 2010
This book is available as an e-book.

The leader who had no title: a modern fable on real success in business and in life, Robin Sharma
London: Simon and Schuster, 2010

How to lead, 2nd ed. Jo Owen
Harlow: Pearson, 2009
This book is also available as an e-book.

This is a selection of books available for loan to members from CMI's library. More information at: www.managers.org.uk/library

JOURNAL ARTICLES

From purpose to impact, Nick Craig and Scott Snook
Harvard Business Review, May 2014, vol 92 no 5, pp 104-111

Connected leadership, Simon Haywood and Martyn Newman
Training Journal, July 2014, pp 55-58

Leadership liabilities of newly appointed managers: arrive prepared, Marius Pretorius
Strategy and Leadership, vol 37 no 4, 2009, pp 37-42

This is a selection of journal articles available for members to download from CMI's Library. More information at: www.managers.org.uk/library

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