

## The secrets of outstanding leadership

• Posted by Christine Parry in [Leadership](#) on Thu, 05/19/2011 - 11:20

- Today's work environment is more dynamic and less predictable
- The way to improve performance now is through employee engagement
- Leaders will always have to think, develop, inspire and achieve
- 

*What constitutes outstanding leadership - and will it be different in the future? Christine Parry examines the behaviours successful leaders will need to adopt in the coming years.*

What will be the biggest challenge for your organisation's leaders in ten years' time? What skills and behaviours will they need to meet this challenge?

The first question is tough as we can't predict the sociological, technological, economic, political, environmental and competitive changes that will unravel over the next decade.

The second question, however, is much easier to answer.

First, let's look at how the environment in which leaders operate has changed. Much of the wealth of the Western world has been built on a traditional organisational model. Decisions were made at the top and passed down the line; employees worked in functional silos; there were rules and precedents to follow; work was predictable and could be organised; the way to improve performance was to improve efficiency.

**"The more complex, dynamic and challenging that your environment is, the more that the contribution of your leaders matters."**

Today's environment is more dynamic and less predictable. There is a greater need to collaborate, to adapt, to innovate and to move faster. As a result, a very different organisational model is evolving. The way to improve performance now is through employee engagement.

One consequence of this is that traditional organisations are vulnerable to their more modern counterparts (think of Microsoft's challenge from Google). The main point is that fundamental issues can arise for organisations when their external environment becomes more complex and dynamic, yet their underlying principles and practices remain akin to those of traditional organisations.

So, what difference does leadership make? Leadership has a huge impact. According to Kenexa's research:

- Up to 40 percent of the success of an organisation is down to the capabilities of its leaders.
- Individuals who feel their leaders are effective have an engagement level that is 500 per cent higher than those who feel their leaders are ineffective.
- The financial performance of organisations in which employees believe their leaders are effective is at least five times greater than organisations where leaders are seen as ineffective.

The more complex, dynamic and challenging that your environment is, the more that the contribution of your leaders matters. It is therefore crucial to understand what your leaders need to do, to be effective.

#### High performance behaviours

After surveying and interviewing thousands of leaders, we've identified 11 high performance leadership behaviours, which fall into the following four clusters:

- **Think** - information search, concept formation and conceptual flexibility. These behaviours include gathering information, handling ambiguity, creating ideas and developing strategy.
- **Develop** - empathy, teamwork and developing people. These behaviours include valuing diversity, listening to others, creating trust and building relationships.
- **Inspire** - influence, building confidence and presentation. These behaviours include inspiring others, creating clarity, giving direction and getting support.
- **Achieve** - proactivity and continuous improvement. These behaviours include making things happen, empowering others, driving change and pursuing excellence.

The 11 behaviours are not all equal. Different leaders will use them to different levels, at different times. For example, in a crisis, there might be less time for conceptual flexibility (thinking outside the box) and more of a focus on influencing others or making things happen.

Bear in mind that no single leader will have strengths in all of these areas. However, every leadership team should include a combination of individuals who, together, have strengths in all 11 behaviours. If the leadership team doesn't have this blend, you can guarantee that the organisation will be found wanting at some stage in the future.

To answer the question about what leadership will look like in ten years time, I would argue that our four clusters of behaviours are completely future-proof. Leaders will always have to think, develop, inspire and achieve. In the future, the context in which they do these things may change. For example, if people no longer work together in an office, it will become harder to build trust in the way that it has been done before. However, doing so will still be an important aspect of leadership.

Leaders are made, not born

None of us are born with the 11 high performance leadership behaviours, although some people do seem to be naturally gifted in some areas. Each behaviour, however, can be learned. The best approach is to use multi-faceted development that involves feedback, assessment, training, coaching, mentoring and stretch assignments.

Typically, today's leaders are good at gathering information, forming ideas, gaining support and making things happen proactively. These behaviours are well developed, possibly because they reflect the way that individuals have been assessed and rewarded in traditional organisations. Leaders are not so good at getting diverse groups of people together and listening to and understanding different points of view.

It would be ridiculous to imagine a surgeon learning to operate simply through observation and trial and error). Yet, when it comes to leadership - which is probably one of the biggest challenges for any human being - many organisations seem happy to let their leaders learn by osmosis.

Don't fall in to this trap. Prioritise leadership learning, develop the necessary behaviours in your leadership team and encourage senior leaders to model these behaviours ('walk the talk').

Whatever happens in the future, leadership will be the key differentiator between successful and unsuccessful organisations. Our 11 behaviours hold the key to outstanding leadership. The organisations that crack this will be the ones that truly succeed.

*Christine Parry is managing director of Kenexa Leadership, the leadership development specialist. More at [www.kenexa.com](http://www.kenexa.com)*