

# Unlocking Leadership

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### Introduction

The Unlocking Leadership model is an approach to leadership development that is informed by research and promotes what is commonly considered to be good leadership practice in a modern, developed and largely knowledge-based economy.<sup>1</sup>

Our findings show that:

- Although leadership is difficult to define precisely, it can be modelled in a meaningful way to provide guidance to existing, lapsed and emerging leaders
- Leadership is necessary at all levels and it does improve performance for organisations, teams and individuals
- Leadership is different from management although both are necessary for an organisation or a group of people working together to perform well and get results
- Leadership can be learned, but it must come ‘from within’ and learning is best achieved through a mix of self-awareness, emotional engagement, experiential learning and practice
- Leadership is present only when leaders act to do something that influences others and so it requires a personal commitment to change if someone who does not lead, or does not lead well, is to learn to lead or lead in a more effective way
- Leadership development programmes, if properly designed and delivered, with attention given to organisational readiness for transfer of learning, can create new and better leaders.

### Leadership Definition

Leadership is a complex interaction between people (leaders and followers), the context in which they find themselves, the relationships that form, how active they are, what they do and the results they achieve through their actions. For Unlocking Leadership we use the following definition of leadership:

*Leadership is an active, influencing relationship among leaders and followers who intend real change that will result in the achievement of objectives held in common.*

Our definition of leadership helps us to understand how it is possible to build leadership capacity in anyone who is serious about his or her development as a leader. It is expressed in a way that enables us to say whether or not a person is behaving in a way that shows leadership in any particular situation. This makes it easier for us to recognise it, measure it and plan to improve it in verifiable way. See Table 1 (overleaf) for a more detailed explanation of our leadership definition. Of course, if you think about it, in the neurological hierarchy of things, a leader will only do the things they are motivated to do and whilst they can perform a competency there is no guarantee that they will be minded or motivated to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> See our Leadership Overview guidance notes for a wider discussion on the theories and models that have



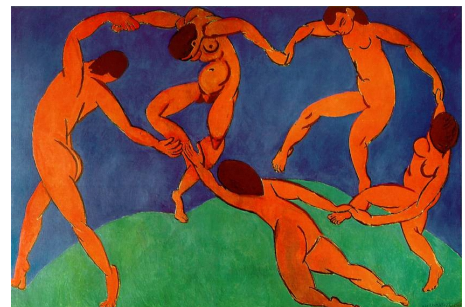
**Table 1: Leadership Definition**

Key Words	Importance to Unlocking Leadership
Active	To be effective a leader must be active and actively engaged with followers in order to inspire them to pursue a shared vision
Influencing	The result of a leader’s actions must be to influence others to become followers and respond as required to achieve objectives
Relationship	Creating a common bond and shared identity based on trust and understanding between leader and followers, as individuals and as a team
Followers	It is not possible to lead without followers and mostly they can choose whether or not to follow – this makes them important and powerful
Intend real change	A leader has to act with positive intent to gain and retain followers and for sustainable leadership; a leader needs to demonstrate that the change is real and meaningful for followers
Objectives held in common	To sustain follower engagement, a leader needs to get results and show progress towards achieving objectives and these need to be aligned to realising the shared vision

There are a number of well-known metaphors for leadership. A mountain conjures up images of team working and reaching the peak together. An iceberg might encourage a learner to reflect on the importance of knowing what is hidden from view and below the surface, despite being of immense importance.

For Unlocking Leadership we prefer the metaphor of a dance<sup>2</sup>. As Warren Bennis has reflected,

*Heifetz and Parks help to bring to mind the idea of an energetic dance that binds the leader and followers, in which each side is fully present, active and able to shape the other.*<sup>3</sup>



Leadership as a Dance

A leader is entirely dependent on having and retaining followers in order to be a leader. Lose your followers and you no longer lead. This is a touchstone for leadership, which

<sup>2</sup> Our image of a dance is taken from Henri Matisse. (1910). *Dance (II)*. , Oil on canvas, Displayed in The Hermitage, St Petersburg

<sup>3</sup> Parks, Sharon, D. (2005) *Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World*, Harvard Business Press, Boston, MA



research has supported with findings that suggest that the quality of the leader-follower relationship is directly related to performance and employee satisfaction.

The lesson is this: making the effort to develop high quality one-to-one relationships with individuals is as important as encouraging people to work collaboratively, as an effective team.

It is important to understand the personal nature of a leadership journey and how much it is tied to context. This goes some way to explain how different people can lead in different ways and yet each is considered to be, in their own way, highly effective. In truth, **there is no one best way to lead**. Not only is leadership an intensely personal pursuit for the leader; it is equally so for followers.

Nevertheless, whilst each leader will approach the task of leadership differently, there is evidence of effective leadership characteristics held in common. Studies consistently show that a good leader encompasses most, although not necessarily all, of the following personal attributes and qualities (listed in alphabetical order):

- **Active and positive**, setting personal example, infusing core values and building relationships as the basis of individual and team motivation
- **Authoritative** in providing direction through a clear vision, strategy and plans to enable individuals to take action and get results
- **Decisive and dependable** in terms of exercising good judgement and ensuring follow-through on decisions made
- **Encouraging collaborative working**, in teams, whilst also holding people to account for their individual performance within a team
- **Inspiring** others to commit to transformational change by developing, articulating and communicating a clear sense of purpose expressed enthusiastically as a vision and strategy to be shared and embraced by all who would follow
- **Integrity**, usually expressed as the leader being trustworthy, honest, fair and acting selflessly in the interests of followers and the collective cause
- **Intelligent and competent** on three levels:
  - cognitive (know what and how; knowledge and ability)
  - social (know who and know what is going on and how to influence)
  - emotional (self aware, self managed and exercising behavioural flexibility)
- **Persistent and tough-minded** in dealing with difficult decisions, poor performance, complex problems and disappointments
- **Questioning and challenging** the way things are at present and taking assertive and decisive action to influence and shape how things will be in future
- **Recognising individual** effort and performance through regular contact, feedback and



conversation.

### Five Fundamentals of Unlocking Leadership

Unlocking Leadership aims to provide some form of coherent support to emerging leaders; it is therefore designed as an approach to leadership development that involves five fundamentals that, if addressed, will help emerging or lapsed leaders to unlock leadership in themselves.

The German philosopher Hegel once pointed out that one cannot eat fruit – it is only possible to eat apples, pears, bananas and so on. Viewed in this way, leadership is seen as a general, descriptive term that offers little help to those who need to know what to do in order to improve themselves as leaders. To unlock and unleash leadership, we need to identify the specific apples and pears of leadership and thereby be able to collect and use them to provide the sustenance needed to grow and maintain good leadership practice.

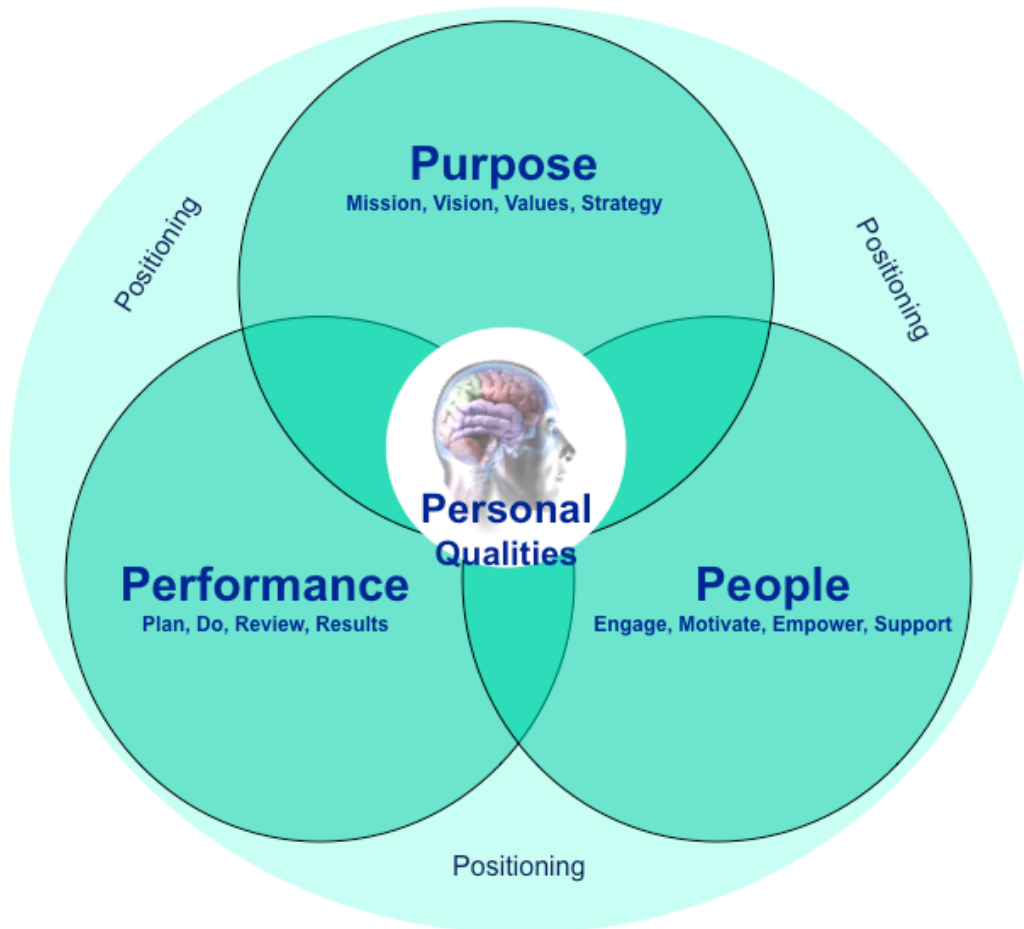


In Unlocking Leadership we strive to provide each individual with the fundamentals they need to address to become an effective leader. The five fundamentals for unlocking leadership are as follows:

- **Personal Qualities**  
*demonstrating integrity, competence, decisiveness and behavioural flexibility*
- **Positioning**  
*knowing and understanding the context of the internal and external environment*
- **Purpose**  
*articulating clear mission, vision, values and strategy*
- **People**  
*engaging, motivating, empowering and supporting people*
- **Performance**  
*planning, making things happen, reviewing and getting results.*

These fundamentals are not frozen; rather, they are in constant motion. They are affected by the internal and external context in which they exist. Context is created by ever changing environmental forces. Leaders can, to some extent, influence external forces, but mostly they can only act in response to the external environment they face. They can, however, more easily influence the internal environment and therefore the culture and climate of the organisation or team they lead. This interplay is illustrated in Figure 1 (overleaf).

Figure 1: Five Fundamentals of Unlocking Leadership



### Unlocking Leadership in Practice

There are a series of practical implications for anyone committed to undertaking an Unlocking Leadership programme. Using our methodology will inevitably require personal change in a range of areas. This next section illustrates the range and complexity of leadership qualities, competencies and practices that appear to be held in common amongst good leaders.

#### Personal Qualities

*A leader needs to have well developed social intelligence. This is the ability to determine the requirement for leadership in a particular situation and select an appropriate response. This embraces the concepts of behavioural flexibility and emotional intelligence: being self-aware, self-managed and proficient in the exercise of key social skills.*



This is about being realistic rather than perfect. It is about how you understand, manage and develop yourself. A leader needs to be sensitive to their own and others' patterns of behaviour and work to exploit strengths whilst accommodating, if not overcoming, weaknesses.



A leader needs three levels of intelligence: cognitive (knowledge and ability); social (know who and know what); and emotional (self aware, self managed and able to respond flexibly and appropriately to influence others).

Improving intelligences will require openness to personal change. It will mean being willing to self-disclose fears and weaknesses and even better, embracing 360 degree feedback in order to identify any hidden gaps.

It is considered to be a good thing for a leader to have self-belief, strength of conviction, passion and persistence in pursuing a vision. However, there is value also in having enough sense and humility to recognise and deal with personal failings and limitations that become apparent and affect follower relationships.

Where action is taken in regard to personal development, the result can be increased emotional intelligence and improved follower relationships based on a new shared understanding of personality types, values, preferred patterns of behaviour (e.g. Myers Briggs Type Indicator) and learning styles. It means a leader being able to adapt to work with people on the basis of mutual understanding. This requires a reciprocal approach in order to work well in building better relationships.

### **In terms of Personal Qualities, a leader needs to:**

1. Be self-aware and use feedback to know, develop and manage as a leader
2. Work to a strong set of values, especially in relation to integrity and fairness
3. Take care of his/her own physical and mental health and well-being
4. Be enthusiastic and positive about the organisation and its mission
5. Have the social skills needed to influence others
6. Demonstrate political astuteness in dealing with complex situations and issues<sup>4</sup>
7. Identify key influencers and decision-makers and build good relationships with them
8. Adapt to deal with different people and situations and use a variety of leadership styles as required
9. Be prepared to speak out and act in a decisive manner to address difficult and complex issues
10. Follow through on decisions made and make sure action is taken and reported on.

### **Positioning**

*A leader must position themselves and the organisation within the prevailing context, by monitoring the situation around them in both the internal and external environment they face.*

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<sup>4</sup> This is the ability to understand what you can and cannot control, when to take action, who is going to resist your agenda and whom you need on your side.

A leader must constantly network and build social capital so that they are alerted to change and so that opportunity can be exploited. This needs to be balanced by being seen to be active, accessible and engaged internally.

Intuition will serve a leader well; however, a leader is well advised to periodically use market intelligence and hard data to identify and confront 'brutal facts' in order to see new trends that are sometimes hidden from consciousness in a flood of enthusiasm or wishful thinking based on commonly held assumptions.

Seeing the big picture and responding to external trends requires a willingness to gather information, see patterns, make decisions, communicate and act quickly in the face of change.

There is also an internal context and a leader needs to establish a healthy organisational culture, leading to an engaging and energising organisational climate. This may mean challenging existing and long-held sets of attitudes and behaviours that are now inappropriate or ineffective.

A leader needs to have a strong moral compass to guide their decision-making and in turn, command respect. Surveys of followers consistently place integrity at the top of the qualities list for a good leader. Most people will look to the leader's values and behaviours as a guide to their own overt approach in the workplace.

Showing enthusiasm; setting standards for behaviour and attitude; showing by example; encouraging and supporting others; being seen to address poor performance and inappropriate behaviour are all essential qualities that need to be acted on if they are to become "the way we do things around here".

It also means showing commitment, demonstrating discipline and acting with consistency and persistence in pursuit of organisational purpose – especially in the face of pockets of resistance.

A leader should take time out to reflect on personal and organisational values and how these are lived out in practice. This may mean shaping as well as responding to the norms and social identity of the organisation or groups within it.

In many organisations values are written down as 'core values' or 'guiding principles' but are not talked about. Making frequent references to values in discussion and feedback sessions is a great way of letting people know and understand what attitudes and standards of behaviour are expected of them.

A leader should encourage people to challenge what and how things are done and encourage an atmosphere of innovation and continuous improvement. This also means seeking openness from followers to compensate for any tendency to avoid 'confronting brutal facts' in regard to changes in the environment and organisational performance. Positive and constructive challenge contributes to a climate that is energising and motivating for people.

An effective leader seeks 'reciprocal influence' so that followers speak out when change is needed, especially if this has to do with behavioural change in the leader.

If culture is a reflection of how things are, then climate is how it feels. What is the climate



of the organisation and is it positive and engaging? A leader must pay attention to the behaviours, language, rituals and symbols that make up the culture of an organisation. A leader can influence this by what they do themselves and what they tolerate or encourage in others. A leader's mood will be contagious. If you can control or contain your mood (emotional intelligence) you can influence the mood epidemic for good or bad.

Although we live in a highly logistical and electronic age, we are all emotional, human beings and great leaders understand this. Good leaders use technology and quality systems to accelerate performance but they know that it is people who press the buttons. If people are not engaged and motivated then the buttons may not be pressed.

Good leaders develop a people culture, with open, person-to-person communication that is about face-to-face conversation and dialogue, not just systematic responses and electronic messaging. This creates a great climate to work in.

A leader should engage with people in a way that means they can answer positively to the twelve organisational or team climate questions listed in Appendix 1.<sup>5</sup>

### In terms of Positioning a leader needs to:

1. Continually scan, assess and help interpret the meaning of events in the wider environment
2. Be open to and bring forward ideas and opportunities for discussion
3. Stay up-to-date by interacting with knowledgeable people and events in the wider environment
4. Encourage others to build networks and relationships that will keep them informed about the external environment and market trends
5. Look to the future in a way that raises questions for us about whether or not the organisation or team will need to change its plans
6. Challenge the way things are in a constructive and positive manner
7. Be creative and look for ways to innovate by suggesting or backing new ways of doing things
8. Encourage others to experiment and take calculated risk
9. Be prepared to tolerate failure when planning and problem solving
10. Model and influence the type of organisational and/or team culture that they want to see emerge and grow.

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<sup>5</sup> Source: Buckingham, Marcus & Coffman, Curt (1999) First, Break All The Rules London, Simon & Schuster.

### Purpose

*A leader must have or find a compelling vision and a clear sense of purpose. The vision needs to elicit passion if it is to attract followers. A leader should set a small number of important goals that give meaning to the vision.*

A leader must have or develop the ability to capture and articulate a sense of purpose and state this or somehow demonstrate this to followers in the form of a shared vision. This could be in the form of words, stories, pictures or imaginable ideas.

The vision will need to be put in context with clear guidance on values and realisable goals if followers are to see the scale of the task and how they can participate in the process of getting there. Clarity about desired outcomes is a powerful driver.

This will require clear communication at all levels, ensuring that the vision is understood by everyone in the organisation.

A leader needs to balance a persistent, almost rigid, focus on end goals, with the ability to be flexible and adaptable in managing the journey itself.

#### **In terms of Purpose a leader needs to:**

1. Be enthusiastic and positive about the future in a way that excites others
2. Establish and describe a clear sense of purpose, expressed as a vision
3. Be able to articulate and share his or her vision in under two minutes<sup>6</sup>
4. Establish specific outcomes, expressed in a way that is understood and can be acted on by others
5. Plan in a way that provides direction at all levels (organisation, team and individual)
6. Ensure that strategies are in place and aligned to vision, values and objectives
7. Model the way by establishing a set of balanced, SMART objectives and milestones<sup>7</sup>
8. Ensure that stakeholders are informed and appropriately involved in the envisioning process
9. Be adaptable and prepared to change plans as circumstances change
10. Create time and space for others to take in and understand the vision from their position

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<sup>6</sup> Commonly referred to as an “elevator speech”

<sup>7</sup> Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Realistic, Timebound

### People

*A leader must understand others and how they view the world around them. A leader needs to build high quality relationships with followers, as individuals, as well as in groups or teams.*

A leader must be able to communicate and build rapport with individuals. Understanding people's personality, patterns of behaviour, preferred roles, motivational fuse and changing circumstances, is crucial to maintaining interest and performance. You cannot get the best from people if you do not know them.

A socially and emotionally intelligent leader will keep people aligned and engaged by using appropriate styles of leadership based on the needs of the individual, the context they are in and situations they face. This can only be achieved if there are good leader-follower relations. Good relationships result in good communication, knowledge sharing, responsibility sharing, and commitment to organisational and/or team goals. People need to know and understand what is expected of them if they are to perform well.

There is no one best way to lead. In uncertain times a leader needs to be more transformational than transactional, which requires clarity of vision coupled with adaptability and openness to a change of direction en route. Where there is additional day-to-day certainty and routine, a transactional approach is more acceptable, which means laying down clear pathways for teams and individuals to follow. What people universally appear to find de-motivating is a negative, passive or laissez-faire approach.

People operate individually and as groups and so leadership skills are required at both these levels. Engaging with people, communicating with them, recognising their contribution and caring about them are all factors in creating a healthy organisational climate with high performance and satisfaction. Pushing for performance outputs without regard to the satisfaction of people is unlikely to be sustainable.

Not all individuals, at all times, can be fully and emotionally engaged in their work. Things happen, both in and out of work. A leader should understand and allow for those who fulfil their contractual obligations only and get the job done efficiently and effectively. A leader may want more signs of engagement but in these circumstances he/she must at least ensure that individual followers are each treated fairly and are recognised for their contribution and contract compliance.

#### **In terms of People a leader needs to:**

1. Act as a positive role model to others
2. Make sure others know and act in line with agreed values, attitudes and behaviours
3. Energise people by creating an atmosphere and environment they find enabling and empowering
4. Communicate what is expected of each individual in their role
5. Build appropriate, high quality relationships with individual team members
6. Foster collaboration, mutual trust and cooperation across the team
7. Create a sense of common identity, commitment and optimism in the team



8. Take time out to support, develop and recognise people as individuals
9. Appreciate and give praise when a job is well done
10. Find ways to celebrate success e.g. small wins such as project milestones

### Performance

*A leader needs to make sure that plans and resources, are in place to enable people to translate strategy into action. The leader must see that action is taken to get results and then ensure that feedback is given on performance. People need to know what is expected of them if they are to work energetically and collaboratively towards a common purpose. A leader should seek to enable and empower people (in teams and as individuals) if they are to be able to participate and indeed innovate in helping to achieve results.*

Leadership without planning and without the management of those plans is difficult to sustain. If vision is to become reality then a leader must embody the vision and initiate, or allow others to initiate, plans in the form of clearly defined strategy with agreement on objectives, tasks and resources.

A good leader will give life and reality to vision and enable people to act by involving them in planning: developing processes and establishing boundaries through agreed policies, processes and resources.

This might be considered 'modelling the way' and should include small wins to encourage, motivate and energise people as plans unfold towards the shared vision. People, stakeholders and employees, should be involved in the planning process. It is important that they know and understand the plans agreed and their role in implementing them.

A leader needs to be able to express, in practical terms, what they expect of people. This means discussing and agreeing with followers (in teams and as individuals) a set of appropriate and challenging objectives, leaving them scope to act on the basis of their talent and have some fun in the process. People will also want to give and receive feedback on a regular basis.

A leader will need to advise on, as well as agree on, processes and plans, so that everyone is working to agreed standards and in acceptable ways. This will require different levels of engagement, depending on whether it is at strategic (board and senior management) or operational (team-based) or action plan (person-centred) levels.

It will require a different frequency of engagement depending on the proficiency, experience, context, and performance of an individual or team.

To achieve high performance through others, a leader must enable and empower people to act. This will require them to understand their motivation, provide resources, support personal development and follow up with feedback through a regular performance review process.

Unlocking Leadership is an approach that will help an individual to build their capacity as a leader. Although we know that leadership is primarily about relationships, with all the complexity this entails, it also has a very practical, results-oriented side. We expect people to work to a plan, along a performance pathway, to achieve agreed outputs and



eventually, desired outcomes. The end game for a leader is to get results, but results that are sustainable.

One way of describing a leader's main role is to see it as connecting people with purpose and supporting people, as followers, by leading them along a performance pathway (see Figure 2 below). In summary, to connect people to purpose, a leader must:

- Clarify purpose and objectives
- Position themselves and the organisation based on context
- Establish a performance pathway
- Provide resources and remove obstacles
- Guide, support and recognise people
- Regularly review progress to make sure that objectives are achieved.

**Figure 2: Connecting People and Purpose**



### In terms of Performance a leader needs to:

1. Make sure that SMART plans are in place for individuals and teams<sup>8</sup>
2. Ensure that policies, processes and resources are available to support plans
3. Know how plans will be achieved by ensuring everyone operates to an agreed form of 'plan-do-review' cycle
4. Get people to talk about plans and progress made against them, at regular intervals
5. Focus on getting results through people by supporting them and recognising that it is people who improve performance
6. Be clear about and communicate the specific role and tasks expected of teams and individuals
7. Ensure that activities are assigned to a 'responsible owner' to manage or perform

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<sup>8</sup> Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Realistic, Timebound

8. Offer support and guidance to team members through regular one-to-one review sessions
9. Track performance and give people feedback on their performance
10. Make a point of periodically reporting back on performance, upwards, sideways and downwards.