

No cookie cutter required

To be a great leader, just get real



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Hi there.

As a leader, we know you're probably time-poor and stress-rich. You've downloaded this e-book now, but finding the time to read it all will be another story, right?

Well the good news is this book is something you can dip in and out of. As they're all stand-alone thoughts on leadership, you can read the chapters one at a time or binge-read late at night when the office is a little quieter.

You've got a friend

Did you know **50% of CEOs feel lonely at work?**

We get that: it's not easy to be open and vulnerable enough to create real friendships when your role demands that you take the tough decisions with discretion, and maybe a little bit of distance.

The thing is, though – you can't be a great leader unless you commit to being a human who relates to other people in a totally authentic way. If you're slipping on a leadership mask as you walk across the office threshold each day, how are those around you ever going to get to know the real you? Because if they don't get you, they won't be able to work out what it is you want from them. And so begins the downward spiral of fragile relationships and uncertain delivery.

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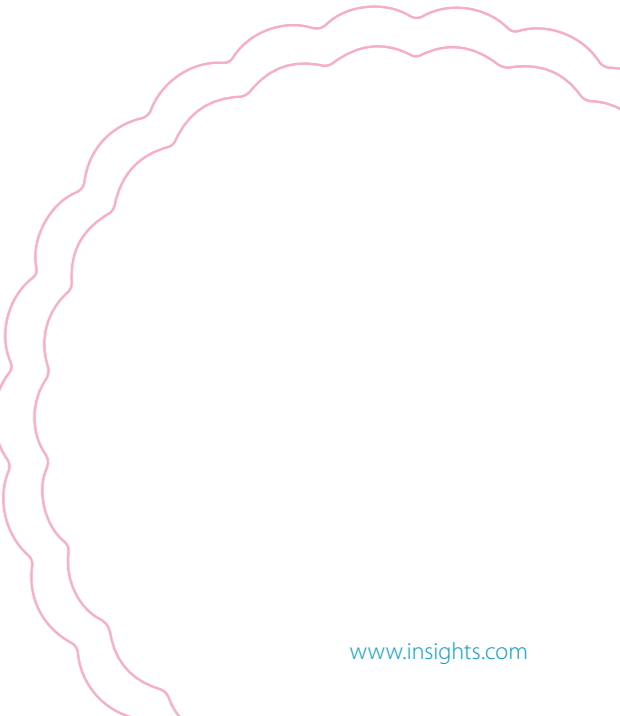
Showing up as a real, flawed and human leader works on more than one level. Firstly, you'll be able to forge real relationships with those around you, and maybe even friendships that last a lifetime. Secondly, your greatness as a leader springs right from that individuality that you've been hiding, in order to fulfil some corporate expectation.

You should use your real strengths to shift gears for those around you – dial up your determination when the chips are down, stop waiting for your turn to talk when your colleague needs a good listener, bring your best potato salad to the next potluck lunch – as long as all of these are real facets of your personality.

We say: no cookie cutter leadership please. The very best, most potent leaders are sparky, even spiky, unpredictable people – think of Sheryl Sandberg, Richard Branson and Jeff Bezos. We all feel like we know how that dinner party would go, and that's their superpower.

Leaders are not – cannot – be one size fits all. The best leaders should be one size fits one.

Read on. Enjoy. And come talk to us if you are a leader whose superpower is already tucked away inside, just waiting to be revealed.



Chapter one

Self-aware people are an organisation's strongest competitive advantage

Chapter one

When we talk about change here at Insights – and we do, a lot – we often quote the statistic which says that around **70% of change initiatives** fail. It's actually a pretty startling number, but it has somehow ceased to shock. It's accepted, even perhaps expected, that instituting organisational change is akin to pushing a rock up a hill: difficult, time-consuming, exhausting and ultimately pointless.

So let's bring that stat into focus by thinking of it in a new way – if your job is to push through organisational change, then around 3.5 days of your working week are just an exercise in futility.

Now doesn't that sound like something your organisation needs to address – and now?

Change is a grass-roots thing

Sure, it's normal for directional change decisions to come from the top. Those right at the head of the organisation are the ones who have the strategic vision, access to all of the pertinent information, and the ultimate responsibility for the organisational performance, so it makes sense for many companies that directional decisions are top-down.

"If the people do not change, there is no organisational change."

– Schneider et al (1996)

This can only work however, if business leaders understand that the level of agility and resilience the organisation displays in the face of change will come from the bottom up. And that's because change doesn't happen to organisations – change happens to the people who make up the organisation.

Ready, set, change

In a stable environment, people generally know what they're getting when they show up to work each day. That old familiar desk, the same 'what did you do last night?' chat with their colleagues (and for that matter the same colleagues). They're faced with work they know how to do, goals they've long been on board with, and a leader who's been around long enough to really get how they tick.

But in a constantly-evolving environment, all that comforting familiarity is lost. If the organisational goals shift, so do the goals of the people who make up that organisation. So one Monday morning you hit your desk, and your workload could be different, you could be matrixed into new teams, given new priorities, or been assigned to a new project. Your mug, the chair you've adjusted to just how you like it, your desk, the view from your window – in a constantly shifting environment, all of these things could be up for grabs.

Self-awareness as a competitive edge

People who have been given the time and space to develop themselves, to understand their own strengths, what's at the root of their personal workplace struggles, how they can be most effective, what motivates them, and what kind of leader they will flourish under – those people will be much more equipped to re-focus their priorities and put their skills to the test in new ways, than those who have been slotted into a role and given no personal development since the day they got their key fob.

And that's borne out by facts; numerous studies show that increased self-awareness at work can lead to better team building, improved communication, more

effective leaders, and better staffing decisions. On the other hand, low levels of self-awareness can be linked to an increase in workplace conflict, less authenticity in relationships and a defensive attitude about personal shortcomings.

That's why, no matter how bang-on the directional decisions taken at the top, if the people who make up the organisation aren't prepped for it, the change will simply fail to embed, and will become part of that sad 70% statistic. This should also serve as a warning; if you know that change is coming next week, next month, or next year – start investing in your people today. It could just give you the competitive advantage you need.



Increased self-awareness at work can lead to better team building, improved communication, more effective leaders, and better staffing decisions.

Chapter two

Developing your people:
a vital investment that's a
personal journey for all



Chapter two

As a leader, you always need something from your team. Whether that's engagement, higher productivity, a more creative approach to problem-solving, or just that they all damn well get along, you need them to show up strong every day.

But it can't be all one-way traffic; there's a deal to be struck here. And that's because, no matter what you need from your team in order to meet your collective goals, they also need something from you.

All of your people, in order to be as good at their jobs as they can possibly be, need your investment – and we're not just talking cold hard cash here (although there's a lot to be said for fairly rewarding your people).



People investment is a productivity multiplier

So what kind of investment are we talking? Well, there are many different ways that you can invest in your most important asset. Maybe it's about money, but it could also be, for example, creating the right kind of environment for people to work in, giving public recognition where it's due or giving people with a social conscience time off to work on a charity project they really care about.

However, you can give your team the kind of gift that lasts a lifetime, and that's personal development that will help them build great working relationships everywhere they go. Sure, you can – and should – invest in their hard skills, but relationship skills, once learned, act as a productivity multiplier forever.

According to a Gallup poll, 45% of Millennials say that having a job that accelerates their development is very important to them. Given that that generation will make up three quarters of the workforce inside ten years, it's way past time for organisations to give up the idea that people development is a luxury, a nice to have, or one size fits all.

45% of Millennials say having a job that accelerates their development is very important to them. – Gallup

Learning looks different for everyone

What we teach at Insights is that every single person in an organisation is a unique mix of strengths, challenges, and preferred ways of working. Think of the composition of your team; we bet it's a mixed bag of introverts, extraverts, talkers, thinkers, doers, planners, procrastinators, dreamers and strivers, those who hit the ground running at 7 am and the late night crew who prefer to hang out in the office after hours. A great leader will understand and appreciate the variety of their people and treat them all in the way that works best for each individual – and how you develop your people should be no different.

Learning styles are as personal as the car we drive, the way we take our coffee or how we choose to show up at work – and that means that different elements of learning will speak to some people more loudly than others. That's why our learning journeys don't just hit one note; we design our learning to appeal to people in their own way, in their own time, on a device of their choice. We mix it up with videos, exercises, online content, deep and detailed individual profiles and powerful live learning experiences.

Insights for your people, breakthroughs for your business

We make learning journeys work hard – they flex and fit around your people and their own preferences and needs. We know people – so we know that when we deliver insights to your people, they reach a tipping point where you begin to see real breakthroughs in your business. That’s why we make sure that our learning reaches people where they are. If they’ve got a five-minute window, they can watch an interactive

video and see how their people skills are stacking up. If they’re rarely seen without a phone in their hand, we’ve got digital content covered. But if they love to dive deep into the detail, our profiles will deliver such a deep analysis of their preferences that they’ll wonder how we do it (or if we’ve been talking to their mothers – we really haven’t).

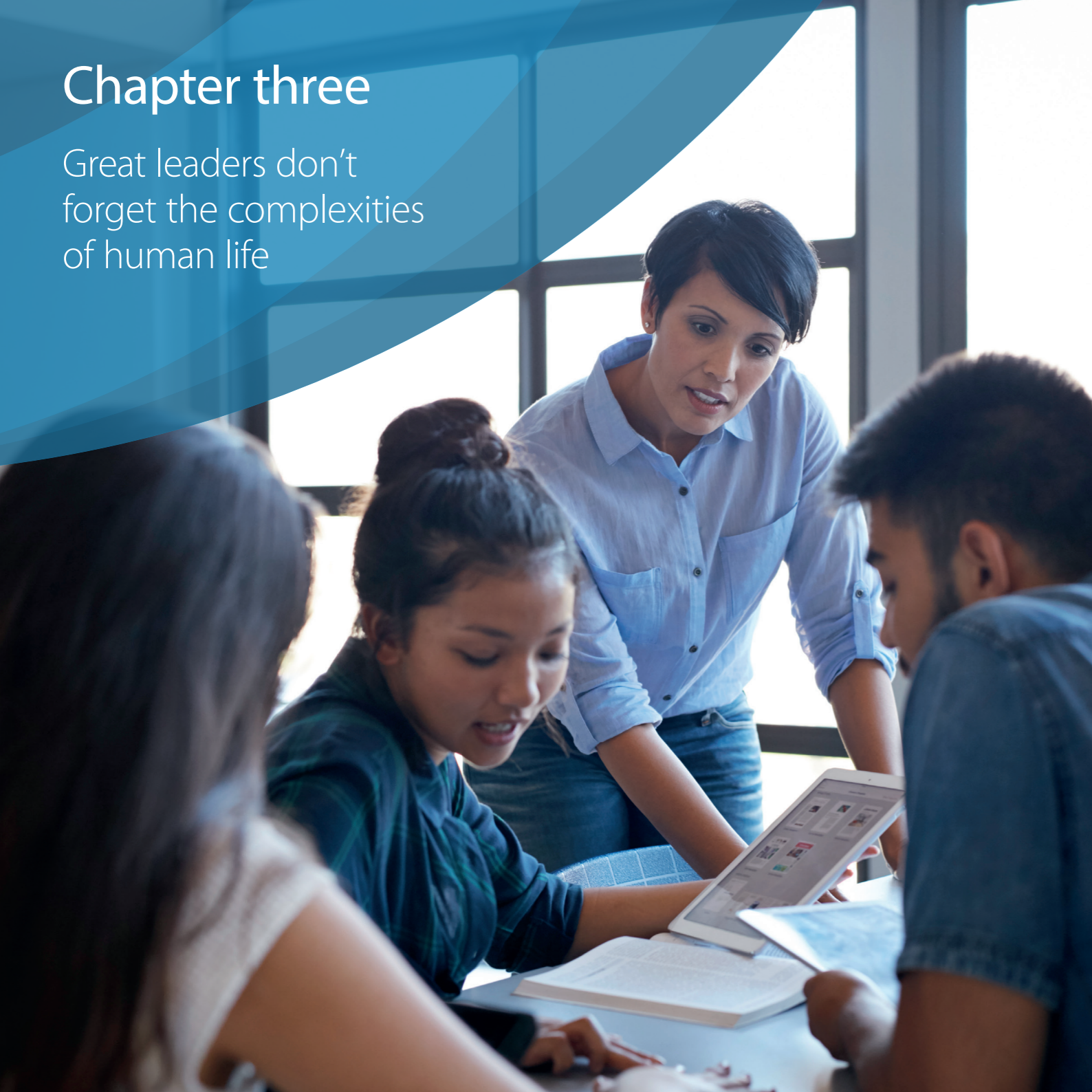
Beginning the journey

Systems and technologies come and go; processes change, priorities are constantly re-aligned, and that’s just the way it goes. So invest in those solid, practical skills as much as you need to. But if you don’t invest in the fundamental, elemental relationship-building skills of your people, your team success is built on shifting sands that can be washed away in the first big storm to hit it. By developing the relationships between your team members, you’re shoring up the successful future of your people, your team and your organisation.

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Chapter three

Great leaders don't forget the complexities of human life



When you look around at your colleagues and those you lead, do you truly see them? Not just the 'work' version of them, where they're good at negotiating with suppliers, but freeze when it comes to networking, or love organising the sales conference but hate setting the sales targets. But the real human inside the office wear.

According to the [Gallup Global Emotions Report 2017](#), 70% of people worldwide reported that, on the previous day, they had laughed, smiled, enjoyed something, and felt well-rested and respected. How great is that? More than two-thirds of the world's workforce are feeling pretty good right now. Thumbs up for bosses everywhere!

Ah, but hold on. As well as those positive emotions, 36% of people felt worried, 35% stressed, one in five people felt angry and sad, and a worrying third of people said they were in significant physical pain. So there's a complex matrix at work here: a number of people who laughed yesterday were also quietly worrying, and those who enjoyed something may have done so despite their physical limitations.

Humans aren't worker bees who show up to complete tasks on the queen bee's behalf, they're messy and complex and capable of being stressed-out and laughing at a cleverly satirical meme at the same time. So as a leader, what's your responsibility for the people – the humans – that you lead each day?



Lead holistically

There's much, much more to those you lead than what is on show in the office every day, and it's important to recognise the jumbled bag of emotions that every single person carries with them on a daily basis. If you're a task-focused kind of leader this might be tough, but if you fail to recognise the human life that wraps around the work your team does, you're missing out on so much context. Let's think of an example.

Of all your workers, do you know whose kids are doing well in school and whose are struggling? Does that even sound like something you should care about, when you've got annual reviews to do and a board meeting at 2 pm? Well, we say yes. The people in your team whose kids are unhappy are more likely to be unhappy themselves, and so are prone to experiencing negative emotions, even at work. People don't just shut off from their home lives when they step over the threshold of the office.

Choose who you are as a leader

If the root of someone's diminished performance at work is difficulties at home, there are two ways to deal with that: either you can toe the corporate line and manage their performance, or you can choose to see beyond the worker to the human in front of you, and work with them to manage what's going on and how it's impacting their work.

Of course, we recognise that you can't change life circumstances for your people – but you can (and as a truly effective leader, should) constantly check in, be aware of what's going on for them, what their daily struggles are, and find small ways to support them.

If flex-time would help them find their balance, give it a shot. If they are crying out for a project to get their teeth into as a distraction, help them get their head in the game. Whatever it is – remember that great leaders instinctively lead holistically, and don't restrict your view of your workers for your own convenience.

You can't change life circumstances for your people – but you can be aware of what's going on for them, and find small ways to support them.

Chapter four

Does someone dominate the airtime in your team?

If there's one thing in the business world that never goes away, it's the quest to make teams more effective than ever before. After all, great teams build great organisations, and the pressure on them to achieve is real and constant.

Recently we came across a study which suggests that the most productive teams are those where everyone's voice is heard. According to the research, "groups where a few people dominated the conversation were less collectively intelligent than those with a more equal distribution of conversational turn-taking."

As the leader, it's probably pretty clear to you already who the more dominant are amongst your team. This person (or people) may come up with a lot of good ideas, they may drive the team to take action, they may make sure everyone's on board and they might be diligent when it comes to evidencing their opinion, but here's the thing: in doing all of that, they're unintentionally lowering the collective intelligence of the team.

The most productive teams are those where everyone's voice is heard.

Equality of airtime is key

By focusing on promoting access to airtime for all of your team members, you'll be giving space to everyone who currently feels shut out of the conversation – and to those who haven't noticed or cared yet, but will soon notice the difference once the airwaves are clear for them to speak up.



You'll be encouraging innovation to flourish, as by allowing ideas from everyone to cross-pollinate, the team will potentially come up with solutions that are bigger, better, and more creative than before. You'll be boosting morale, as nobody should feel disenfranchised by any other team member. And you'll definitely see an increase in the effectiveness of the team, as the ability to handle multiple information sources and work-streams is infinitely larger than any one individual could process.

Turning equality into reality

To reach this state of equilibrium, you'll have to take a step back whenever your team interacts, and take a cold, hard look at who is making most use of the airwaves. Watch for patterns that emerge: does one person tend to shrink into silence in the face of someone with a lot to say? Are there people who are resting on their laurels, safe in the knowledge that someone is speaking on their behalf? Or is the room perhaps filled with frustrated people who wish they could get a word in edgeways?

If you want to promote the 'equal airtime' theory, you're going to have to come up with some ways to make sure that the intention to provide equality is turned into reality.



A structured approach

Perhaps, instead of letting meetings be a free-for-all, where everyone is given the chance to chip in (but few are doing so) you might want to institute a structure instead. For example, once a topic has been mooted, everyone has one minute to give their response, then one minute to answer any questions that may arise from that. In this way, you're not just encouraging everyone to speak up, you're making it a requirement of being part of a seriously effective team meeting – and, of course, a seriously effective team.

Shared leadership

Or, perhaps, if you – or someone else – always chairs the meetings, you could create a system where everyone gets their day in the hot seat. And when each person takes charge, they're allowed to add one thing of their

choice to the agenda. That way you're giving people the opportunity to make their interests and ideas heard, but nobody should feel that taking on the mantle of leader has been sprung on them.

Up the team game

So in the spirit of being heard – bring up this very topic at your next meeting and ask your team how they would like to address any inequity that exists. It's possible that it is a real factor, but it's been the status quo for so long that it's ceased to be a burning issue. Well, the research suggests that making it a burning issue will seriously up your team's game in the long run. So give it a go at your next team meeting and see where it takes you. Just make sure you listen to every voice in the room – and not just the loudest.



Chapter five

Not all extra miles are run in the same way




According to research into what makes effective teams from the [University of Iowa](#), “even a single extra miler ... plays a more important role in driving team processes and outcomes than do all the other members.”

So what is meant by extra-miler? Well, according to the research, it can be described as someone who exhibits ‘extra-role’ behaviours. In other words, they routinely get involved with, give their opinion on, help to shape and devote their attentions to things that are technically outside of their individual remit.

And in doing so, the impact on their colleagues is such that the team is made that much more effective by their very presence.

“Even a single extra miler ... plays a more important role in driving team processes and outcomes than do all the other members.”

— Research from the University of Iowa



Who's your extra-miler?

So, now we've described what an extra-miler is, you can probably picture exactly who we're talking about when it comes to the team that you lead. There's very possibly that one person who, while not in a leadership space, nonetheless holds a pivotal position in the team. They role model the behaviours of a colleague living above the line, and their commitment to creating great processes leads to an overall boost in outcomes for the team.

Step back to self-awareness

But what if you are missing some of the extra miles that are routinely being run in your team? To be a truly effective leader, the starting point is self-awareness. Once you know how your own leadership style plays out at work, the possibilities for pondering how this might impact your team are almost endless.

There are almost innumerable ways to lead your team well, but there are also a whole lot of ways for people to run an extra mile during their working week. And that could just be happening more than you think unless you get clear on your own leadership style and the working styles of everyone in your team.

Spotting that extra mile

In the case of the extra-miler, being aware of your own style is key, because it may influence your perception of who is really working out of their skin. For example, if creating seamless processes isn't your thing, are you properly taking notice of the person that's stepping up and making sure it gets done? Similarly, you may be a task-focused leader who thinks that the team shows up simply to get the work done, but maybe there's someone quietly pulling them all together and shoring up team morale.

Or it could just be that your acknowledged extra-miler is the person in the team you've worked with longest, have the best working relationship with, or share a lot of traits with – and those who aren't on the inside track are being unintentionally overlooked. We're all human, after all, and we all have biases we must guard against once we're in a leadership position.

Look below the surface

There is no one-size-fits-all way to work with your team; they're all individuals, with different skills, challenges, dreams, goals, preferences, schedules and extra miles that they'll be willing to run for you. But if they don't feel that the effort and the skills they're bringing to the team are seen by you, and valued by you, then the willingness to strap on their sneakers will fade over time.

So try not to focus on that one very visible extra-miler, and take some time to look below the surface at other ways that people are going the distance for you. Because if just one extra-miler can inspire a whole team of people to succeed, what could a whole team of extra-milers achieve?

We're all human, after all, and we all have biases we must guard against once we're in a leadership position.

Chapter six

Let's applaud those who
ask the toughest questions



In our recent blog on *innovation* we touched on the issue of psychological safety in teams, and it has prompted us to take a closer look into what factors make a team successful.

Think for a moment about the team – or, more likely, teams, given the 21st century dependence on the collective – that you're a part of. Perhaps you're part of a departmental team. Maybe you're also part of a leadership team. In recent times you've probably also been matrixed into project teams or multi-disciplinary working groups.

But how effective are the teams you're part of?

All teams have a set of 'norms' – a code or set of rules that, explicitly or implicitly, govern how the team behaves. For example, teams might be formal with each other, they may all adhere to a team charter, and they may dress down, or up, or be encouraged to speak up whenever they want to. But the interesting point is not what the norms are; what's crucial is that every team member is bought into the code that the team operates within.

Psychological safety net

And that's because only teams that are at ease with each other, which feel protected by these behavioural boundaries, and where all members know where everyone else is coming from, can access the essential zone of psychological safety.

Coined by Harvard Business School Professor Amy Edmonson, **psychological safety** can be described as "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking". In other words, there's a climate of openness in the team which leads to people feeling able to speak up without judgement or censure.

Leaders can begin to weave this psychological safety net for their team in three ways:

- **By making everyone part of the solution**
When a problem arises, reframe it as a potential area for great teamwork: "Here's a huge opportunity for our team, and I'm going to need you all to give it your best in order to make it work"
- **By giving up their infallibility**
The best leaders are open to being questioned, and recognise that making the odd error isn't a failure of their leadership, it's just being human
- **By asking a whole lot of questions**
Role-modelling a questioning team culture encourages team members to be responsible for speaking up and giving answers

Don't let opportunities pass you by

A team which doesn't have this level of safety is unlikely to become a high-performing team, simply because team members don't feel safe sharing their craziest solutions to problems, to ask questions when they're concerned about the direction a project is taking, or just to raise their hand and say, "I'm not sure; could we stop and think about this a little?"

And that could mean that potentially game-changing opportunities are missed, some of the team become disengaged and the leader may become frustrated by the lack of critical analysis in the team – until it all goes wrong, of course, when often people are suddenly all too happy to give voice to their inner critic.

It's not easy to be the person to ask the toughest questions – it's not always welcomed and it may not always be a stellar career move – but it does take bravery, and a certain level of psychological safety. So let's applaud those who have the courage to try, and the open-minded teams that make it possible for them to do so.

Conclusion

Thanks for reading

The key to successful leadership is firstly, to get to know yourself deeply, and then do the same for your colleagues. After all, you can't get the best from those around you, if you don't really know who they are – what makes them tick, or tock, or hit that deadline that you just threw at them.

If you would like some help to gain knowledge of yourself and your team, Insights can provide you with a relevant, insightful and easy to apply approach/model.

In turbulent times, when change is becoming a constant in our lives, when political and economic landscapes are shifting in unexpected ways, we all owe it to ourselves to stand firmly in our own space and be wonderfully, uniquely ourselves.

Get in touch

If you are looking to become much more effective as a leader, we can help you explore what kind of leader you are, and what kind of leader you want to be.

Whether your focus is on delivering results, improving skills or motivating people, we will build a leadership pathway tailored to your needs.

To learn more on how we can work with you to inspire your leaders, come and talk to Insights today.

Wherever your Insights leadership learning journeys takes you, it's sure to be beneficial for your whole organization.

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