

Is your organisation 'LEADERFUL'?

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Many voices are clamouring for a greater distribution of leadership throughout organisations. We have Charles Manz and Henry Sims championing 'superleadership' – the fostering of leadership in others. Then there is *Shared Leadership*, with Jay Conger and Craig Pearce singing the praises of shared informal leadership in teams of knowledge workers. With *Creating Leaderful Organizations*, Joseph Raelin coins a new word to describe organisations that foster leadership throughout their ranks.

The rationale is that the world is now too complex and fast-changing for those at the top to provide all of an organisation's leadership. Additionally, knowledge workers require significant empowerment to feel motivated and engaged. Businesses that compete through innovation critically need everyone thinking hard about where next the business might go to find new sources of competitive advantage, however short lived.

Distributed leadership is sometimes portrayed as an extended form of empowerment. Besides letting front line employees make decisions about their own work, they can also help to guide, direct, organise and coordinate the efforts of their colleagues. The idea of self-organising teams is not new but, as Raelin puts it, such teams are not leaderless, they are leaderful because every member shares the leadership load. The claim is that we need to explicitly recognise this fact and be more proactive about cultivating such distributed leadership. It is arguable, however, that this is really distributed *management*, not leadership. A better candidate for the latter role might be *thought leadership*.

Thought leadership is the championing of new ideas by any employee and it can be directed down, up or sideways. It is not simply innovation. Thought leaders who are not personally creative can champion good ideas wherever they find them. It is also broader than being a product champion because thought leaders can advocate changes in any working practice, product, service or business model. Whenever you convince your peers or your boss to think differently on any topic, you have shown thought leadership. Most theories of distributed leadership are really about decentralised decision making to get things done fast. Thought leadership challenges the status quo to create the future.

The business case for promoting thought leadership

Not many businesses can survive today without innovation. And this does not just mean new products or services. A constant stream of new ideas is needed on all aspects of how business is done. Hence thought leadership is not just a matter for the R&D department. Calling upon knowledge workers to show thought leadership can not only motivate them to devise and champion more new ideas, it can also increase the level of engagement you need to retain them.

Key features of thought leadership

- It is not a role or responsibility, but rather an occasional initiative.
- It's not about managing people. It's just the championing of a new idea.
- It is multi-directional unlike traditional leadership which is directed downwards.
- It ends when others buy the idea. It does not manage the implementation of that idea. This is especially true when thought leadership is directed upwards where the knowledge worker does not have the power to implement the idea. Not all

thought leadership results in action in any case. It can simply generate a change in mindset or prevent the making of an expensive mistake.

- Inspirational influencing skills are not mandatory. Thought leadership can be shown through logic, factual presentation or demonstration using a prototype.
- It depends on technical, not personal credibility, which is why we can buy the ideas of eccentrics who we wouldn't trust to run a meeting let alone a team.
- Unlike positional power, thought leadership cannot be monopolised. It is egalitarian and ephemeral because no one has a monopoly on good ideas.
- It can come from outside the organisation, such as when knowledge workers follow the lead of an industry guru. Hence it is not restricted to working teams.
- It can be shown unintentionally by example, such as when a newly hired customer service employee automatically uses leading edge skills learned elsewhere and unwittingly shows the way for colleagues.
- It's not about making decisions for a group. Upwards leadership, especially, must be only an influencing process if the person showing such leadership does not have the authority to make the decision. Thought leadership, therefore, cannot be directive, autocratic or transactional. You cannot command or reward someone to change what they believe, only for complying with what you want them to do.
- It is like sports and market leadership in being at least partly competitive. The thought leader is saying: 'I have a better idea.' And business today is very much a war of ideas. But thought leadership also has a collaborative dimension because no organisational leadership can be said to occur unless people get on board with the idea. Conversely, conventional leadership is portrayed as a wholly collaborative exercise, one of people working together to achieve shared goals.

Thought leadership is vitally important in itself, but it also sheds light on the nature of leadership more generally. This is partly because it so completely sifts out all managerial elements that currently contaminate our understanding of positional leadership. If we say that all leadership in knowledge driven industries is thought leadership, then executives must be switching hats from leadership to management whenever they manage implementation or drive execution. This means that anything to do with managing people, fostering their development or coaching them must be seen as constructive management rather than leadership. But this is another story.

Fostering thought leadership

- Start by overhauling your characterisation of leadership.
- Upgrade the place of management from a narrow controlling function to a more enabling, facilitative role, one that, like investment, does whatever is necessary to get the best return on all organisational resources.
- Clarify what roles executives can play to add value when not showing leadership.
- Help employees develop the confidence to show more thought leadership.
- Train executives to foster, and be more receptive to, upwards influence.
- Link thought leadership to career management policies.
- Celebrate and reward successful instances of thought leadership.
- Get the balance right between top-down control and bottom-up leadership so that you have neither rigidity nor anarchy.