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ways to lead from the front in professional services… and bring your team with you

The world is changing, and so are ways of working. Professional services firms are finding ways to remain relevant to clients in the information revolution. The best are engaging with technology and unlocking the resources of a new kind of knowledge worker to achieve global presence.

However, the looser, project-based structures adopted by many organisations - coupled with the speed of change in the market – have produced a greater need than ever for creative leadership.

Leadership is the lever by which professional service firms can protect their knowledge collateral and mobilise the energies of their people in pursuit of a shared vision. This is key to achieving competitive advantage.

1 Lead people, don't just manage them

Management is about maintaining the status quo, setting tasks, allocating resources – doing things right. Leadership, on the other hand, is about doing the right thing - setting direction, fostering innovation and defining purpose for followers.

The problem though is that the advantages of our new organisational structures have come at a price. The decentralising of core functions like HR has pushed many responsibilities down the line to individual professionals – often key partners with significant fee generation responsibilities. More and more of their time is now taken up by administrative people-management processes. They operate complex systems for selection, appraisal and performance management while demonstrating regulatory compliance by documenting each action. And all the while they put out the normal fires and make themselves increasingly available to external and internal stakeholders. Is it any wonder, then, that people often forget to lead?

The cost of this is potentially huge. Leadership is the only real means of gaining the critical increment in productivity that comes from discretionary effort - people going above and beyond. Each employee going 20% beyond the defined limits of a functional role is enough to unlock 80% more performance and client satisfaction. Some have called this "extra–role performance", others have called it "organisational citizenship". Where they all agree is that good leadership is the key to accessing this crucial resource.

Action 1 *If you do nothing else, make sure you prioritise getting to know your people, sharing with them the things that are important to you. Spend quality time off-task and on-relationship, establishing shared goals and values as a unit of people. Above all, articulate your vision and set a climate for the workplace. This means looking for whole-team creative tasks whenever possible and getting off-site together at least once a year.*

2 Give people space

Capable people need a degree of autonomy and enough latitude to determine their own ways of working. Henry Ford achieved great efficiencies by fragmenting roles into simple, easily replicated tasks performed by unskilled (replaceable) labour. Professional services, though, are not an exercise in time/motion studies. Your people have the intelligence and are developing the skills to strategically apply their abilities to pleasing clients and solving problems. Don't cramp their style if you want them to grow!

Action 2 *Let your people "own" the route they take towards a mutually agreed end-goal. They may need guidance and they may need support. What nobody needs is to be micro-managed as if they're working on a production line. Empower your people to shape their own way of working within the confines of what is acceptable to clients and your team. You will then unlock their capability and commitment. In practice, this means less telling and more selling; less judging and more joint-reviewing. In a wider sense, it also means passing over to people greater responsibility for their own career paths and their own continuous development.*

3 Know what you and your people expect from each other

In our delayered organisations, and in the context of a difficult economy, psychological contracts make a bigger difference to performance than any formal document. What we're talking about here is what the employer truly expects of their people, and what the employee truly expects in return.

For example, a firm might expect a new intake to work long hours with a "can-do attitude" and an openness to feedback. The employee on the other hand (in return for initial late nights and repetitive and mundane tasks) might expect active career development and regular face-to-face time with a senior partner. None of this can really be represented legally, but it forms an implicit contract nonetheless and to break it is to damage engagement, commitment and satisfaction.

Action 3 *Hold regular, open discussions with your people, particularly in new relationships. Enter this negotiation as you would any other – with a clear understanding of what you want and need from the other person and what you are willing to give in return. Ask them what success looks like to them, and get them to be specific. Be equally specific about what you want, using relevant examples and anecdotes. You can also keep up with changing trends in what people expect by attending recruitment events, taking part in informal discussions (e.g. online) and holding exit interviews. Look too at the research literature and the professional journals.*

4 Be fair, look fair – and give people a voice

Fairness in procedures and in the distribution of resources and rewards is intrinsically important. Of equal importance is that this fairness is seen and believed by followers. This confers "face justice". Research has shown that involving people in decisions by keeping them informed and hearing their "voice" is the way to achieve this - even when those people do not have instrumental influence on final outcomes.

Action 4 *Use webcasts, team meetings and focus groups to both transmit and gather information from people. Simply sharing in this way makes an enormous difference to perceptions of fairness and consequent levels of commitment and productivity - even in the most difficult circumstances like restructuring and redundancies.*

5 Set tasks and rewards with care

A person will only put in the effort you need from them if all of the following are true:

1. **They believe they can do it.** If a person really thinks they can jump over a hurdle they will have a proper go at it. If they think they don't have the skills or the right resources (e.g. good shoes and time to practise), then they won't bother.

2. **They value the reward.** Different people want different things. They have different values and needs. Some want recognition, status or involvement in key projects; others are motivated by money or personal satisfaction. Get the reward wrong and people won't invest effort, nor will they persist in the face of difficulty.

3. **They trust that the reward will be forthcoming.** Trust is crucial. If a person thinks their success will go unrecognized, then it stands to reason that they'll save their energies for something more likely to be personally productive.

Action 5 *If you want people to do more than comply (or pretend to comply), take time when setting important tasks. Work carefully through each of the above points, because each has a subjective element. Somebody's assessment of their capability to achieve a task can be influenced through careful coaching. You might also need to make them aware of key resources to support them.*

To uncover valued rewards also requires careful delegation. If possible, decide with each individual team-member how you will reward task success. Make sure that assumptions about what people want don't interfere with your thinking. And show them you have understood. Build trust by making all processes, measures and reviewing mechanisms explicit and transparent.

6 Set the right goals

A good goal needs to be personally targeted and defined following four well-established principles.

1. **The goal needs to be clear and specific.** If you tell a person to throw a ball (but don't tell them when, where or how hard) then expect a random, unstructured action rather than successful completion of the task.

2. **The goals should be difficult.** Dropping a ball into a bucket at one's feet is hardly inspiring as a challenge. On the other hand, successfully meeting a difficult challenge provides an intrinsic sense of achievement. When a person lands the ball in a far-off bucket, they will then want to know how often they can do it in a row, or how far they can do it from.

3. **The goals should be accepted.** In the realm of sports psychology, this is where we ask how much a person really feels a need to land the ball in the bucket. You want people to look you in the eye and really commit to a challenge.

4. **Feedback needs to be given.** The feedback is the information your eyes (and ears) give you about how close you are getting the ball to your target. Playing with earmuffs and a blindfold would be pretty uninspiring – you wouldn't know if you were doing well or badly, and quite soon you would give up and do something else instead.

Goal-oriented behaviour has the dimensions of direction, intensity and persistence. Setting specific, measurable and timebound goals helps people to calibrate their energy. They will point it, like a ball, in the right direction with the right amount of force, and for as long as they need to be successful.

Action 6 *Getting the right level of difficulty in goal-setting takes experience, judgement, and regular reviews. You don't want people to fail, but you do want to stretch them and trigger their achievement instincts. The best guide to this is the team–member themselves. Encourage them to set an appropriate level of challenge (nudging them on to higher levels). Don't do this just to extract more from them, do it because you have confidence in their abilities. This ownership of the goal is a key part of acceptance, as is an identification of value for them of success. Finally, giving regular, balanced feedback has long been established as part of management best practice.*

7 Be your own leader - and manage your own internal resources

On most days Leaders make a lot of difficult choices, which cover strategies, resources, suppliers and projects. They tend to make their choices by email, phone or following a chance encounter in a corridor. Some of these episodes promote strong emotion. They might be in front of a frustrated client, an irritating colleague or a seemingly intractable problem. The strategies might be high-risk, and they might have upsetting consequences for people. And all of this might be happening against tight deadlines.

Research has revealed that two actions – deciding things and regulating one's emotions - draw on the same reserve of energy. When this reserve is empty we can experience a state that is known in psychology as "ego depletion". Until you replenish the tank, something is in danger of giving – either your decision-making ability or your emotions. Anyone who has, in the process of making a choice, snapped out at an innocent party, will be able to identify with this phenomenon. So will anyone who has ducked a tricky decision because they can't handle the emotional fall-out.

> **Action 7** *As self-aware leaders, you need to spot the warning signs and know where your breaking points are. Look after your teams and your organisation by looking after yourself. For some, this might mean taking a quick break – even if it's just to the bathroom and back. Alternatively, delegate a task rather than persuading yourself that the quickest most efficient thing is for you to press on and do it yourself. If possible, change activity rather than firing back a quick response. And if it's getting really bad, do you have a trusted confidant? Or is there a piece of music or an image that helps to release the pressure? The key to all of this is to be self-aware, take responsibility, and be honest with yourself about how you're feeling.*

8 Reflect and make others do the same

Regularly engaging and involving team members can, of course, open the door to other dangers. Key amongst these are the often unconscious processes that occur under the surface of group decision-making. These processes can block the exchange of clear and honest information. Ask yourself:

- Is there a "conformity process" at work in which consensus is achieved by people doubting their own beliefs and going along with the majority?

- Can you see evidence of "obedience to authority", with people stifling objections in deference to others' seniority or status?

- Are there signs of "impression management", with people saying only things that cast them in a good light?

- Is there "polarization", in which slight points of disagreement shift to extremes in the heat of battle?

- Or are there "halo effects" in which a bad idea seems good in the mouth of a team favourite?

What these and other polluting processes share is that they distract from the task at hand and undermine group cohesiveness. The solution is to reflect regularly, and to encourage others to do the same.

> **Action 8** *Discuss openly the sort of dangers mentioned here, and agree to create a safe and trusting atmosphere in which people can challenge one another whenever they suspect that things are not what they seem.*

Next Month...

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This **Winning Business Digest** has been written by **Dan Leatherdale** at The Results Consultancy.

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