

## Five Key Questions for Leadership Development in Uncertain Times

Feb 2017

In these turbulent times for our sector, charities need the security of highly effective leaders who are able to provide strategic, tactical and psychological safety to keep their organisations afloat and flourishing. The more uncertain the external environment, the more staff will look to leaders to provide them with all of the answers. And in turn, the more pressure that senior leaders find themselves under, the more they look to leadership programmes to give them clear instructions about how to lead and how to reassure their staff.

We certainly have great examples of outstanding leadership to share on our [programmes](#), and we encourage participants to share their own successes too, but there are no easy answers when it comes to leadership. Instead we think it's essential for our programmes to convey the underlying frameworks, ideas, principles and mind sets that underpin leadership practice because these provide an anchor for knowing how to go about tackling future leadership dilemmas collaboratively with staff in an uncertain world.

These are the five “anchor” questions that we ask ourselves when scoping and designing leadership programmes:

**1.) Leadership for what strategic purpose?** What outcomes must leadership achieve for our beneficiaries? How can we achieve greater sustainability and impact, and how could we innovate? Ultimately, what is our theory of change?

The field of strategic leadership offers a wealth of visual models and frameworks that enable leaders to sharpen their focus, organise their thoughts, and hone their decision-making so they are able to identify an appropriate course of action. We want participants to graduate from our programmes with a great set of these models and frameworks for their leadership “toolkits”, but we also want them to leave with the wisdom to appreciate which of these tools to use at any particular time; with the curiosity and enthusiasm to seek out relevant new tools and to test them for themselves to determine whether these are right for their organisations; and with incisive analysis to make the most of what these have to offer.

Most importantly, these frameworks are a vehicle for generative conversations with trustees, executive, staff, volunteers and stakeholders, to tap into their wisdom and passion, and align organisational thinking.

**2.) What are the qualities of outstanding leadership?** What leadership behaviours are required here to deliver our mission in the most impactful way for beneficiaries?

There is a wide body of research available to evidence the general leadership competencies and behaviours that are effective in contemporary organisations. On our programmes we regularly provide 360 feedback using The Work Foundation's Outstanding Leadership Framework because it has a strong evidence base, and it organises these leadership qualities in an accessible format that participants relate to well.

Our 360 feedback coaching brings these qualities to life, draws on the insights and perceptions of participants' colleagues up, across, down and outside of their organisations, and gives participants an opportunity to gauge how effectively they actually apply their knowledge of leadership in the workplace, and how well this fits their current working environment.

**3.) How does leadership 'work'?** How do these leadership behaviours actually connect with, engage, and inspire followers?

For staff to flourish they need to know that their needs are 'borne in mind' by their leaders so that they can be freed up themselves: to think, critique, and create at their best; to be resourceful, develop, and learn from experience; to resolve problems, to work at full capacity and feel appropriately stretched whilst protecting themselves from undue stress; and to collaborate, negotiate and enjoy relative autonomy whilst taking account of others.

This sense in staff of needing to feel understood in order to flourish is so essential to leadership that it's not possible to simply teach leadership behaviours by rote. Leaders have to get beyond thinking in terms of behaviours to grasp the underlying intentions - to practice their roles with a grit and authenticity that demonstrates that they really do understand what motivates their staff, and really do want them to flourish in the workplace and to succeed in their roles. It's a critical feature of our leadership programmes that we encourage participants to fully grasp these intentions.

**4.) How do I develop leadership in myself and others?**

Sophisticated leaders are able to grasp the full complexity of their organisations. They can read the culture and climate, and have the talent to observe what fits their specific settings. They can flex and adapt their approaches accordingly, experimenting wisely, think systemically, and anticipate the intended and unintended consequences of their actions.

It's one thing to understand this in the calm of a leadership programme, and an entirely different thing to be able to apply the analysis effectively back in an organisation where there are a myriad competing demands for your attention. So we encourage participants to set themselves career-stretching workplace projects for the duration of the programme they attend, through which they can test learning from the programme, and to report back on their progress from one module to the next.

We also run co-coaching and action learning sessions, giving participants a safe space in which to explore their own real-life workplace dilemmas in greater depth and to find robust solutions to these. They also reflect on how they respond 'under fire' and how their personal reactions to a problem may be affecting the outcome. We do this so that participants develop the habit of deeper inquiry and are better equipped to coach their own staff in turn to enable them to tackle future dilemmas for themselves. The task of leaders is to develop other leaders, not just followers.

**5.) What is my leadership role in all of this?** What must this role achieve and how does it interrelate with the other key positions?

At the start of our senior leadership programmes, many participants – [new chief executives](#) especially - disclose that they feel like imposters who are undeserving of their appointments. They are surprised and relieved to discover that most of their peers on the programme feel the same way too! We encourage participants to get beyond the mind set of “do I really deserve this?”, and instead to recognise that their charities need them to take up their authority and to wholeheartedly embrace the role for the security and wellbeing of their organisations.

On both our [bespoke sector-specific programmes](#), and on our open access programmes, participants come away with a passion for leadership and a greater confidence in their current roles, as well as an enduring peer support network of programme alumni. What we hope we convey to everyone is a sense of the opportunities that senior leadership roles offer to make a great difference in the world, and the excitement of supporting others to grow into their leadership roles too.

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