



Commander to enabler: the new leadership conversation

THE EVOLUTION OF LEADERSHIP IS A STORY THAT HAS MIRRORED THE CHANGING EXPECTATIONS OF BOTH ORGANISATIONS AND ITS EMPLOYEES ALIKE.

For a long time, the 'Command and Control' approach was associated with good leadership. It allowed businesses to run their ships without being questioned, giving employees little responsibility to think for themselves.

As society evolved and individualism grew, expectations from employers and employees also changed. Employees wanted their voices to be heard and their opinions to be considered. In return, employers wanted a greater level of commitment from its staff, not necessarily in long service but certainly in engagement and output. This push and pull has continued over the years creating a tension between the commitment shown by organisations and employee engagement, both parties essentially asking each other "what's in it for me?".

Some organisations have responded by creating lifestyle work environments where employees can eat and play without ever leaving the office and therefore work extended hours. Others have forgone the traditional hierarchical structure and installed a more collaborative matrix organisation where employees are left with more freedom but are required to lead without authority.

So, what is the next chapter in the evolution of leadership that meets this changing context? The operating system at the root of leadership needs to shift from commander to enabler. The components to make this happen are twofold; Purpose and Connection.

PURPOSE

We now know that people will show up more, give more and invest more when they know that their work matters and by extension, they matter. Purpose is important to many of us and has been rated in the top requirements for the millennial generation and beyond. When leaders lead from a place of purpose, they are much better placed to enable effective outcomes by clearly articulating three distinct levels of meaning.

Level 1: Global

What is the difference that your organisation makes in the world? What is the world's need that your organisation is meeting and why does it matter?

Level 2: Regional

How is your business unit/department enabling the global purpose? What is the difference that this group is making? What organisational need is this group meeting and why does it matter?

Level 3: Local

How does the team and/or individual enable the regional and organisational purpose? What is the difference they are making? What need are they meeting and why does this matter?

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Rooting the conversation in purpose makes taking tough decisions, giving/receiving feedback, leading change, and delegating undesirable tasks much more palatable and coherent. However, a common mistake that leaders make is that they over-focus on one level of purpose in their conversation. So, the purpose feels either outside of reach and meaningless, or it is too focused on the local creating an unhealthy us vs. them dynamic. The strength in purpose, as a foundation to the leadership conversation, is when a leader has integrated the three levels into their context and own words and can flow between the three levels creating alignment; regardless of the level at which they lead.

CONNECTION

Connection is the 'how' when making the shift from 'leader as commander' to 'leader as enabler'. It enables purpose to matter and it is the behavioural shift that marks the evolution of the leadership conversation. Simply put, a purpose without a connection leads to empty words. So how do we create connection?

■ **Balancing between telling and asking**

Connection is not created when someone tells you what to think, whether it is about purpose or day-to-day business operations. The leader has a point of view but understands that leading with their opinion first does not allow space for the people around them to engage and find their own connection with the topic at hand. Leaders need to let go of the belief that their main value is having the answer and trust that enabling the answers to

emerge from those around them is indeed effective leadership. To do this, leaders need to get used to asking questions first.

■ **Being open to diversity**

Being open to diversity of thoughts and ideas which are not your own is also crucial. The trick to being open is to suspend both judgment and the critical voice inside your head that makes rash and often harsh conclusions. It is important for leaders to recognise that inner voice (as we all have it) and put it aside long enough to listen.

■ **Be curious**

Curiosity is a mindset that helps leaders let go of having to lead with their opinions first. Being curious allows connections to flourish both relationally and innovatively. It also helps the leader ask the kinds of questions which unlock potential, engagement and innovation.

■ **Listening to understand**

How often do we as leaders really listen? In our busy days 'listening to respond' can be more time efficient but it can also kill connection. Creating connection requires leaders to pause and engage in one of the most powerful leadership skills; listening.

CHALLENGING INGRAINED BELIEFS

The shift between commander to enabler in leadership conversations cannot be minimised. It can be a tough test of a leader's self-perception of value, worth, and experience. It can challenge the deeply ingrained beliefs that leaders hold regarding effective leadership. Leaders may also tell themselves that the expert boss is what their employees want from them. Maybe that is true... for now. However, it will be those leaders and organisations who cling to the traditional leadership conversation that risk being out of touch and ineffective in near future.

Leaders who have already made this switch attest to the impact of an 'Enabler' leader - someone who can clearly articulate the three levels of purpose in day-to-day operations while promoting opportunities of connection. Organisations who embody the new leadership conversation benefit from a workforce which is personally committed to drive results because they feel that they are valued and trusted, and because they know that they matter.

For advice on how to create an enabler leadership culture in your business, email Christine Dandy at cda@mannaz.com. ■

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