Knowledge in Action - Issue 26
Knowledge-driven leadership agility

Leaders exert a considerable influence on their organisations' knowledge management characteristics. Leaders' behaviour can determine the extent to which knowledge is sought for, learned, retained and shared. Positive leadership practices reinforce good knowledge management; negative leadership practices undermine it.

Research by Henley's Knowledge Management Forum has drawn on 12 positive leadership practices that drive value-adding knowledge management behaviours. Anyone involved in any form of leadership role – even though they may not formally be designated the overall leader – can productively use them.

In any organisation, leadership behaviour – at all levels – has a significant bearing on organisational behaviour. But leadership cannot be static: 'agile' leaders must be reactive, changing their style and priorities as circumstances change.

Henley's Knowledge Management Forum investigated how leadership practices could make a difference to knowledge management within an organisation, drawing on 12 leadership behaviours that research suggests are important and showing how they relate to the knowledgeable organisation.

> "As a global, knowledge-driven business, MWH encourages conditions that are conducive to knowledge sharing, as well as learning, engagement and collaboration. Participating in this project definitely made me think more about my own leadership style, and how to continue to do and say things that positively encourage knowledge sharing and re-use."
>
> Sarah Grimwood, knowledge manager, MWH Global

Agile leaders who master these practices can positively impact the contribution that knowledge management makes to their organisations.

Pulled four ways

Tension within an organisation can be healthy, arising naturally as people wrestle with choices from different knowledge bases and values – differences which can stimulate creative thinking and innovation. But such tensions can degenerate into disagreement and dissatisfaction.

The starting point for the Henley research was to recognise that agile leaders are skilled at handling tensions caused by apparently conflicting requirements. For example, reconciling local needs with collective interests, negotiating differences in individual and organisational performance priorities, and deciding when sources of past success need to be unlearned because the knowledge of what worked historically is no longer relevant.

At a high level, such tensions can be considered as four points of a compass – **learning, organising, belonging** and **performing** – pulling leaders in conflicting directions. Simply put, they set the agenda by delineating the core questions that need to be addressed in any productive knowledge organisation: how do we learn? How do we organise what we have learned? Who am I in relation to the organisation to which I belong? And how do we integrate different areas of knowledge so as to maximise sustained performance?

Four key leadership practices are suggested as the core to helping agile leaders to juggle these tensions, enabling them to stay true to personal purpose and values while providing a role model for others.

- **Mindfulness** about the ongoing value of experience while remaining open to alternative perspectives (**learning**). Typically, tensions come from:
  - A steadfast mindset versus being open to critique.
  - Looking for value today versus the promise of value tomorrow.
  - Reacting in a timely way versus reflecting carefully.
  - Learning from history versus unlearning the past.

Collaboration, insight ... practical value

Led by Professor Jane McKenzie of Henley Business School, University of Reading, the research project to which this report relates was carried out by Henley's Knowledge Management Forum in partnership with Mastering Leadership Agility Ltd.

- **Accessing broadband capability** is establishing appropriate boundaries for behaviour and judgement in order to flexibly integrate knowledge activities (**organising**). Typically, tensions come from:
  - 'The solution is obvious' versus 'what's your take on it?'
  - Consensus versus 'this will work for now'.
  - Knowing when to compete versus knowing when to collaborate.

- **'Total' leadership** is acting with integrity and being a role model consistently with the values and objectives of the organisation (**belonging**). Typically, tensions come from:
  - Being evangelical about one's own cause versus seeking acceptance by other groups.
  - Questioning of self versus holding fast to personal identity.
  - Being true to self versus staying true to tribal identity.
  - Being self-serving versus serving others.

- **Transcultural competence** means bridging cultures in order to translate values into commercial value (**performing**). Typically, tensions come from:
  - Embracing diverse interests and motivation, versus keeping my 'tribe' on track.
  - Valuing different perspectives versus working for a shared purpose.
  - Fitting others into 'boxes' versus releasing the power of diversity.

> "In the 21st century leader's more social and informal world, the individual rather than the role supports effective leadership. I found that focusing on the 12 capabilities offered an opportunity to explore the leadership practices that I felt least comfortable with, and discover the leadership characteristics I want in any knowledge-sharing interaction."
>
> Susan Frost, knowledge manager and project participant

Further building blocks

A further six leadership practices address the tensions associated with the extent to which belonging, organising, performing and learning interact with one another.

- **Sense making** – Organisations in flux struggle to remain coherent whilst learning to be different. Inconsistencies between evolving objectives and direction make them feel messy and chaotic, making it harder for people to understand where they belong, and to identify what their learning could contribute. Agile leaders have a key role to play in reconciling the context for change with future development needs.

- **Emotional intelligence** – Constantly reconfiguring and reorganising disrupts well-established connections between groups, and can damage relationships. Ways of accessing knowledge get lost, and people have to find new narratives and new ways of explaining their purpose and role. Agile leaders use emotional intelligence to sense, acknowledge and respond to the prevailing mood, nurturing the climate so that people feel committed to the direction of change.

- **One-to-many dialogue** – Promoting performance against current targets is important, but this can damage the process of ongoing learning. Agile leaders achieve both by facilitating a group dialogue that encourages the collaborative application of theory and learning to daily practice.

- **One-to-one relational communication** – Through a one-to-one dialogue in a 'developmental' mode agile leaders build others' resilience, engagement, adaptability and competence, coaching and mentoring to help professional capabilities to be reconciled with organisational performance requirements. They take responsibility for bringing out the best in themselves and others, by combining careful listening and questioning techniques with insightful feedback.

- **Creating a 'performance challenge' culture** – Measurement must be used in order to stretch performance but without damaging cooperation, or creating a toxic climate of detachment and fierce independence, which can inadvertently drive counterproductive behaviour.

- **Co-creating a learning culture** – To exploit the known, and at the same time explore the unknown for the purposes of innovation, organisations have to be able to do two apparently incompatible things at once. Successfully exploiting existing capabilities requires standardising, continuous refinement, and a focus on detail. But exploring new areas of knowledge involves doing things differently, as well as experimentation and a 'big picture focus'. Agile leaders make this happen, creating a learning climate where innovation and continuous improvement occur simultaneously.

Meta-level management

Finally, it is important to consider the broader personal leadership environment in which these practices sit. To the ten leadership practices so far identified must be added two more 'metalevel' capabilities:

- **Personal values sensitisation** is concerned with making people aware of how their personal values affect the way they work with the tensions. Agile leaders stay true to personal purpose and values, while providing an effective and inspiring role model for others. Typically, tensions come from:
  - Knowing how one's values influence one's priorities versus knowing when to question whether one's influence adds value.
  - Expressing how others' personal values are impacting on oneself versus reacting to feeling the difference between people's values.

Responses of those who experience leadership practices in action			
Personal values sensitisation 'I feel valued for who I am and what I bring to my role.'	**Mindfulness** 'Many influences are considered before acting, especially when the impacts will be severe and long-lasting.'	**Transcultural competence** 'We feel valued for who we are, what we represent, and what really matters to us.'	**One-to-one relational communication** 'My personal talents are acknowledged and aligned with what's required now and in the future.'
Sense-making 'We remain well informed about what's happening in the world around us.'	**Emotional intelligence** 'I am respected for how I feel, yet I am very clear about my role expectations.'	**One-to-many dialogue** 'I am encouraged to express myself, contribute and seek improvement in all I do.'	**Creating a performance challenge culture** 'We are constantly stretched to become the best we can be.'
Co-creating a learning culture 'We feel confident in applying ourselves to new circumstances as we are actively encouraged to learn and grow in our roles.'	**Accessing broadband capability** 'We are able to access and share all our wisdom, then use it for the benefit of all.'	**Total leadership** 'Leaders stay true to who they are and others they represent, modelling the culture they want at all times.'	**Encouraging resilience to remain agile** 'We are actively supported to be motivated and alert, so we can remain adaptable and flexible.'

- **Encouraging resilience to remain agile** focuses on self-renewal, and on remaining true to aspirations, objectives and ambitions over time – and in the face of adversity. Agile leaders use systems, processes and operating principles in order to access, use and refresh the range of business capabilities, encouraging people to engage with present and future needs based on the most up to date and relevant knowledge. Typically, tensions come from:
  - Remaining focused on the endgame versus learning along the way.
  - Going through the motions (habitual leadership) versus responding to new needs (habit breaking leadership).

Putting it all together

Anyone in a leadership position – even if not formally designated the leader – can productively use these practices. And the more that people use them, the more likely the organisation is to develop conditions and climate conducive to knowledge sharing, learning, engagement and collaboration.

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Henley Knowledge Management Forum

The Henley Knowledge Management Forum, founded in 2000, is an internationally recognised centre of excellence in knowledge management. As a membership-based community, it is a magnet for leading business practitioners, world-class academics and thought leaders who collaborate to develop insights, understanding and practical guidance on knowledge management.

To discuss the benefits of membership for your organisation, contact Professor Jane McKenzie +44 (0)1491 571454 or Dr Christine van Winkelen +44 (0)1628 486849.

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