

Knowledge in Action - Issue 27

Creating effective leader-inspired learning

For organisations to learn and adapt, their employees must also learn and adapt. Leaders in those organisations must develop the necessary relationships that encourage and facilitate individual learning. Leaders inspire learning – not just in respect of their own direct reports, but over a range of relationships with between peers – through interpersonal

interactions that meet the learner needs.

Different types of learning relationship need qualitatively distinct personal leadership behaviours. Research by the Henley Forum highlights how leaders can adapt to the different learner expectations and create conducive conditions for improving organisations' learning performance.



In a world of constant change, the pressure on organisations to learn and adapt has never been greater. But strong forces push in the opposite direction, maintaining the status quo through procedures, standardisation, and a collective memory of what has worked in the past.

And when change is required, the process of unlearning one way of doing things and learning another is uncomfortable, may encounter resistance and calls for time and space in which to question, explore, experiment, fail, reflect, and learn.

Leaders drive the adaptation process, by providing that time and space, by granting the freedom to explore and fail, and by encouraging those around them to look at things in new ways. Yet while we all recognise this, defining effective learning leadership is difficult.

Am I a learning leader?

- Do I address the distinct differences in 'follower' expectations and needs?
- Do I try to moderate my emphasis on performance appropriately so direct reports feel free to learn?
- Am I sufficiently transparent and balanced to show I am confident about learning jointly with direct reports?
- Do I consciously open doors and create supportive conditions for peers to learn from me?
- Do I value and promote interdependence so that my peers and I can learn together?



Research jointly carried out by the Henley Forum for Organisational Learning and Knowledge Strategies and the Henley Centre for Engaging Leadership examined the characteristics of a core set of leadership relationships, providing insights to help leaders reflect on their own behaviours in different developmental contexts.

Empowering the learning organisation

One of the most important responsibilities of an effective leader is to create a climate in which people feel comfortable and supported in their efforts to learn and change, and feel enthused to develop knowledge that will be useful both to the organisation and themselves in their careers. How they behave in their relationships with peers and direct reports sends a powerful message about the priorities for learning.

But what does effective learning leadership actually look like, both from the point of view of leaders, as well as those they lead?

Alarming, leaders and those they lead struggle to provide a simple answer. This is partly understandable. Learning leadership is not a one-dimensional process: it's possible to see four distinct types of learning relationships at work in leaders' interactions with those around them.

Sometimes leaders will find themselves coaching someone who directly reports to them. Sometimes, the leader and their direct report will learn together, co-creating knowledge as they develop new ways of dealing with changed circumstances. Sometimes, too, the leader will mentor a peer. And sometimes, the leader and their peer will learn together, as equals (see chart opposite).

Each type of learning relationship calls for different behaviours if the learning process is to be most effective. The influence of authority, whether that be expertise-based or derived from formal position, colours conversations and the dynamics of the relationship.

When coaching a direct report, for instance, a leader needs to take care not to slip into an authoritarian

Collaboration, insight ... practical value

Co-ordinated by Professor Jane McKenzie of Henley Business School, the insights into effective learning leadership described here originated in research jointly carried out in 2012 by the Henley Forum for Organisational Learning and Knowledge Strategies and the newly formed Henley Centre for Engaging Leadership.

'performance management' mode. Formal authority casts a big shadow, and telling people what to do is a major barrier to learning.

To choose another example, a leader learning together with a peer has altogether different relationship dynamics. Peers often have expert authority from different knowledge domains. They will each need to listen to – and value – each other's different points of view. They must accept that combining their different perspectives to gain real insight can mean questioning some of the assumptions and knowledge at the heart of their expertise. That takes more effort and interpersonal empathy than one might expect.

Four dimensions

This research combined expertise in organisational learning and knowledge sharing with expertise in leadership to probe the four relationship dynamics, with the aim of building up a more detailed picture of the leadership behaviours which supported and hindered learning in the four types of learning relationships.

Specifically, the researchers interviewed eight leaders in three different organisations, selected because they were acknowledged by others as having the ability to establish constructive learning relationships. Each leader then nominated a person from each

Learning relationships		
Grounds for the relationships	One-way knowledge-sharing and support for learning	Two-way knowledge co-creation for mutual learning
With direct reports from a position of authority and power	1. A manager helping a direct report develop and learn	2. A manager and a direct report develop and learn
With peers from a position of equal of influence	3. A peer helping another peer to learn	4. Two peers with a mutually developmental working relationship

Leader

relationship category to be interviewed to explain how the relationship worked from their perspective.

Finally, these eight 'pods' of leaders and their four relationships were examined to identify patterns within the relationship categories.

Coaching a direct report

In this type of learning relationship, the **direct report** wants:

- Freedom and space to learn
- To feel ownership of their contribution to change, and to see it recognised
- The leader to relate requirements and actions to the bigger picture, so that they can see how their own actions will make a meaningful contribution

For the **leader** in this type of learning relationship, the challenges are to:

- Guide and enable without controlling
- Provide a 'light touch' to steer, rather than dictate overt direction
- Communicate why change needs to happen in the context of strategic goals
- Be non-judgemental about mistakes, viewing them as improvement opportunities

Learning together with a direct report

In this type of learning relationship, **direct reports** can:

- Fill a gap in the leader's capability
- Be more deferential to the leader's expertise and undervalue their own
- Try to avoid exposure to certain parts of the leadership role, such as politics
- Gain reflected status and mental security from 'followership'
- Challenge the leader's thinking without undermining their authority

In this learning relationship, **leaders** need to actively demonstrate humility and encourage questioning of their own ideas and expertise in order to limit the constraints on mutuality that spring from instinctive responses to formal authority.

For both **leader** and **direct report** in this type of learning relationship,

Am I a learning leader?

- Do I doubt my own expertise often enough? Where should I be reflecting constructively on whether my knowledge and experience are still appropriate to the situation?
- Do I ask enough of the right kinds of questions? And do I listen to the feedback?
- Do I create the conditions for others to answer their own questions?
- Do I encourage freedom by building followers' confidence and courage to challenge me, others, the system and the rules?



Am I a learning leader?

- Do I hold the tension of 'not-knowing' long enough for followers to find their own solutions?
- Do I create enough situations where I am accessible? Do I actively engage in my learning relationships?
- Are people 'intimidated' by my position or am I emotionally accessible?
- What more can I do to keep learning at the heart of conversations with peers and direct reports?



the value arises because:

- Both parties enjoy emotional security, and so feel able to build on each other's strengths or offset their weaknesses
- Each provides mutual challenge, but from different perspectives
- The leader is open to exploring more risky or innovative ideas with a follower who is keen stretch the limits of their expertise
- The leader may gain access to intelligence that they would otherwise be shielded from

A peer helping someone else to learn

In this type of learning relationship, **peers** are looking for:

- The stimulus of different skills, knowledge bases, experiences or influence, to extend their thinking or open doors
- Opinions, challenges and support from outside their own context
- Someone who can act as a sounding board or provide affirmation
- Alternative perspectives that will provide insights to crack a problem

A **leader** makes a key contribution to the organisation's performance by meeting the needs of other **peers** in this type of learning relationship, even though it may not directly benefit them. They prevent redundant effort and stimulate insight and development by:

- Allocating time to listening and exploring the problem with a mentee
- Providing expert advice or sharing past experience
- Talking in terms of 'we', not 'you', when it comes to problem solving – but giving credit when it comes to results
- Offering an alternative lens through analogies, reframing, and the use of visual rather than verbal metaphors
- Challenging and encouraging the peer to challenge themselves

Two peers learning together

In this type of learning relationship, the mutual needs of the two **peers** are to:

- Have an ally in the camp
- Be listened to
- Create opportunities to combine ideas
- Expand boundaries in a safe and trusting context
- Examine 'the elephant in the room' willingly and honestly, and without preconceptions
- Exhibit appropriate curiosity about possibilities for mutual win/win outcomes

In this type of learning relationship, the needs of **peers** learning together are fulfilled by:

- Asking the right questions, and providing constructive challenge
- Listening for understanding, rather than providing answers
- Creating space for informal chats
- Giving the relationship time despite the lack of structure
- Having confidence that conversations won't be used as the basis for subsequent attacks.

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Henley Forum for Organisational Learning and Knowledge Strategies

The Henley Forum for Organisational Learning and Knowledge Strategies, founded in 2000, is an internationally recognised centre of excellence in knowledge management and organisational development. 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 for getting value from organisational knowledge resources.

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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