

Getting Real About Leadership

A series of challenges to the way we think about Leadership and Organisation Development

Before You Engage in Any Self Development, Please Read This Lisa Sofianos & Robin Ryde

Leadership Development is Big Business

Most senior executives these days recognise the importance of self-development and will have found themselves, at some point, taking deliberate steps towards raising their own leadership capabilities. The form that this takes varies widely from participation in leadership development programmes to 360 reporting & psychometrics to Executive Coaching, and everything in between.

Last year, TrainingIndustry.com claimed that the global spend on leadership training was £366bn, and according to data from the Chief Learning Officer Business Intelligence Board, nearly 95% of learning organizations either planned to increase or maintain their current investment in leadership development. This is clearly an area of significant monetary spend but also it represents a meaningful investment of time and energy for busy people.

Our work in this field, which has spanned the last 2 decades, has supported the view that the demand

for leadership development has risen steeply. And with it, sponsors, commissioners and leaders themselves have grown in sophistication in understanding and articulating their requirements. However, during this period, we have also noticed that some profoundly important assumptions about self-development have gone unchecked. These relate to judgements, often implicitly made, about where individuals should focus their attention.

Four Development Mindsets

In looking at the approaches adopted, we have seen individuals lean towards one of four development mindsets, that in each case haven't typically been the result of an explicit decision process. We believe that the leadership development community should offer more assistance on these matters, and this is our contribution to the work required.

As we walk through this list, we encourage you to think about which mindset best describes your own.

1. It's All Good

This mindset is characterised by the view that there is always value to be found in learning, and the best approach to adopt is to remain open to all possibilities. While attention to particular themes and leadership topics will develop along the way, for example, as part of a leadership development programme, the mindset that prevails here is one of equanimity - it's all good, and all of the learning acquired will prove useful at some point.

2. All Rounder

In many ways, at least implicitly, this is the default approach for most development. It is motivated by a desire to develop a balanced set of leadership capabilities so that an individual can perform well on all fronts. In this context, as much effort, and often more, might be put into addressing specific 'weaknesses' as to strengths. Weaknesses can often be harder to 'correct' and so additional effort is typically required, while strengths are assumed to be naturally occurring (differently for different people), and therefore requiring less attention.

3. Fit for Purpose

In contrast to an *All Rounder* mindset that assumes that leaders should be prepared for all eventualities, the Fit for Purpose approach targets specific capabilities to-be-developed according to the requirements of a role. For example, if an executive moved from an internally facing role to an external role that caused them to engage more actively with the media or politics, then

their development focus might turn to building capabilities in 'Political Leadership'. Similarly, if a new role required an individual to work across (rather than within) organisational silos, they might target development that helped them with 'Collaborative Leadership'.

4. Strengths-Liberated, Weaknesses-Tamed (SLWT)

While this mindset shares some similarities with an *All Rounder* approach, the focus on weaknesses is only up to a point where a 'good enough' level of capability has been satisfied (where weaknesses have been 'tamed'). Beyond this it is felt that additional marginal gains are likely to be outweighed by the (often considerable) level of investment required. On the other side of the equation in terms of strengths, development effort is focussed on areas of strong capability believing that they shouldn't simply be left to fend for themselves.

Why Differences Matter

The differences between these mindsets might seem slight, but they have important pedagogical and practical implications.

For example, the *It's All Good* approach, runs the risk of generating a lot of developmental effort (and spend) in areas that might be of limited value to a leader. Learners may get lucky and happen upon topics and themes that suit their specific needs, but the approach doesn't then answer the question about where, for them, attention needs to be focussed. An *All Rounder* strategy does have something

to say about where energy should be directed, but its focus on trying to turn weaknesses into strengths, to create an all-rounder, may be fundamentally flawed. This approach will certainly be demanding and frustrating for the individual, as they attempt to work against the grain of their existing capabilities, not always, in fact not often, finding success. But in adopting this mindset we also project a particular, arguably unachievable, image of leadership; one that risks taking us back to a heroic model in which our leaders are superhuman and without weaknesses or vulnerability. A *Fit for Purpose* mindset places leadership in a more transactional frame where the right capabilities are needed to get the task done (which they are), but potentially at the cost of an underdeveloped set of personal attributes common to many circumstances and roles.

The Strengths-Liberated, Weaknesses-Tamed mindset provides some realistic options around self-development and some helpful provocations in the process. Its observance of a good enough principle for leadership capabilities satisfies a sense of pragmatism well needed in leadership development, but it also acknowledges that leadership is undertaken in collaboration with other people who themselves have strengths that can be drawn on. We don't need lone heroes, but we do need good team players and collaborators, and this mindset supports that.

The provocation around what constitutes 'good enough' is a helpful conversation that needs to be had - What is ok? Is this different for different leadership qualities? And

what should we look for to know when this level has been reached? Its attitude to strengths is also refreshing in that it attaches a development journey to the things that we are already good at. Just because we might have natural leanings toward, say, influencing or strategic thinking or resilience and so on, this doesn't mean that either we understand why we have these as strengths, or that we can't move from being good to exemplary, perhaps even unmatched in them.

More broadly this mindset doesn't seek to make leaders fit into the same cookie-cutter shape; all possessing the same qualities in equal measure. It genuinely appreciates authenticity, making a virtue out of it. It embodies an important reality regarding what we know about successful leaders, and that is that they are different. Call to mind the leaders that you've worked with in your career, those that you regard as effective, and we can bet that while some may be similar to one another, there will be others that are radically different. An All Rounder mindset, if successful, would likely have ironed-out these variations.

Strategies for Developing Strengths are Different from those for Weaknesses

Adopting a Strengths-Liberated, Weaknesses-Tamed mindset implies a different approach, and a qualitatively different experience for the learner. It entails:

- A more honest and frank set of conversations around performance improvement

- An explicit validation, and exploration, of the authentic self that the learner brings
- A different, more positive, energy to discussions, with less time absorbed by deficits
- A proper appraisal of the learner's strengths not just in terms of what they are, but what is driving them, their impact and so on
- Work to clarify what is 'good enough' for areas of weakness, both independent of the learner as a general set of principles, and in consultation with the learner along the lines of what they can realistically achieve
- A focus on strengths where there is an opportunity to elevate the level of challenge and ambition of the learner, and for greater risks to be taken in seeking to stretch performance
- Opportunities for the learner to further develop their capabilities by teaching others and passing on their insights
- Explicit conversations around the re-purposing of strengths

Some questions for you to reflect on:

- Which of the four mindsets described best represents your approach to self-development?
- In focussing on your areas of weakness, what represents 'good enough' in terms of capabilities?
- What are the possibilities offered by your particular strengths, and what kind of development intervention would be most useful for you to liberate these?

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Robin's experience spans the private, public and not-for-profit sector working with individuals, senior teams and helping to drive organisational change. Robin's particular strengths lie in the areas of senior level leadership, strategic thinking and the development of modern organisation design. Robin is an innovative thinker and Visiting Fellow of one of the world's leading business schools, Ashridge Business School, Head of Leadership with the Oxford Group, he is a Director with the Australia & New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) and a Fellow of New South Wales' Health Education & Training Institute. Robin has written four books on leadership and organisational behaviour published with Palgrave Macmillan, Wiley & Sons and Kogan Page. Contact Robin on robin@robinrydeconsulting.com



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Having worked with a broad spectrum of companies – from advertising creatives to pharmaceutical companies to leaders of financial services – Lisa works with senior executives on their trickiest challenges. Lisa is a member of the International Coaching Federation, and specializes in areas of leadership resilience, coping with transition and helping leaders deal with intractable issues. Lisa is a Programme Director with Advance HE, works closely with and teaches on the Clore Social Fellowship Programme. Lisa is also an executive coach with the Oxford Group. Lisa co-authored "Creating Authentic Organizations" (Kogan Page, 2014) and has published numerous articles in journals such as Training Journal. Contact Lisa on lisa@robinrydeconsulting.com

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