

Why Leaders Need to Flex Their Style to Meet Business Needs

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As a 25 year veteran of business leadership, one of the most important things I've been reminded of during my recent research is that, as leaders, we should never stop learning our craft or honing our skills.

With my decades of experience in both leadership roles and working as a consultant both supporting business development and implementing leadership training academies, this admission may sound surprisingly forthright. However, my research into leadership behaviour as related to business context has served as a good reminder that there is always something new to learn, and it is revealing some hidden gems of wisdom that all leaders can take on board.

Matching leadership behaviours with business context

It's about a year and a half since we at People & Performance started [The Leadership Performance Project](#), with the ambition of designing and undertaking research into contextual effective leadership. In many ways, this could seem like an odd undertaking, given that leadership is already one of the most researched topics in business.

However, there's still one question that we as consultants are repeatedly asked, but which conversely can also often be overlooked - which leader behaviour is most effective in which organisational context? That was what I wanted to answer when I first signed up for accelerated learning through the Henley MSc in Business and Management Research in October 2016, and it's what I will continue to focus on now through the Henley Doctorate programme, putting in an investment of more than 2,000 research hours over the next three years.

While there's a long way yet to go in my research journey, I want to share my learning along the way. Having analysed over 100 leadership studies and collected stories from more than 20 successful leaders, there are some very positive areas I'll be looking into further. I've outlined below a few real-world examples from my research where leaders have successfully adapted their leadership behaviour to meet business needs.

Treat creating something new differently to maintaining current business

A fundamental but sometimes overlooked part of leadership is understanding what you are trying to achieve before you decide on how you will lead a team. Most leaders spend the majority of their time driving existing business; however if an organisation wants to create something new, (e.g. a new business area, process, service or product), my findings and other research so far indicate that some different and specific leader behaviours are needed.

One of these, which stood out in both the interviews and analysis of existing research, is the practice of 'buffering', or maintaining degrees of separation between the activities of maintaining current business and driving innovation.

One of the leaders interviewed said that she *"actively protects the employees I want to progress our new initiatives, by denying requests for their participation in meetings and other projects, and by moving them to a dedicated joint workplace for the first three work hours every day."* Since she started managing the focus of her teams through this active buffering, her progress on new initiatives has significantly improved. Other studies show the same; if you want progress on your development initiatives, leaders need to dedicate and protect their resources.

Another leader interviewed described the pitfall of not using buffering techniques, and instead treating new initiatives with the same 'planning and follow-up' mindset used for existing business. *"We basically killed the innovation in the business case stage because we asked for detailed plans, KPIs, result forecast and specific delivery milestones at too early a stage in our development processes."*

Ideally, there should have been a first exploratory phase and a certain amount of resources allocated to investigate and develop the new initiative - with those as the only deliverables of the first phase. This would have

buffered the team from the traditional 'pre-accounting' thinking of up-front business cases.



Leaders should learn with their teams to drive business performance

Again and again, the leaders interviewed as part of my research came back to a basic dynamic at the heart of effective leadership - that you have to ask your team members for the right behaviours to drive performance.

In fact, the 'facilitating' part of leadership demands that a leader overtly asks for certain behaviour, reinforcing it when it occurs and correcting other habit-driven behaviours - but this only works when the leader is an integrated part of the collective learning.

A key element in improving performance is for employees to learn from experience and, crucially, to also teach their colleagues to improve. This can be a challenge for many because where it can seem natural to teach a newcomer, it can feel awkward to do the same with an experienced colleague. Making adult, experienced people cross this barrier is difficult. A leader who is part of the collective learning process can bring out leadership

skills within teams from employees at all levels, asking them to teach and learn from each other, no matter what their age or seniority.

My initial research showed that very active and persistent facilitation is needed from a leader until the team reaches a point where the learning practice is ingrained in their culture and habits. One of the leaders interviewed said that: *“We had to learn how to evaluate our own work, to challenge other’s assumptions, to welcome new ways of doing what you know best, to observe, to give and get feedback and to give up habits.”* She described the transformation in her three teams created by organising and running learning sessions focused on process improvements and new service development, saying: *“Eventually we reached a whole new level in our business performance and team engagement by insisting on learning together, but the first five months were tough.”*

What comes next?

My work so far has not only revealed differences in what constitutes effective leadership in different organisational contexts, it has also revealed emerging findings which challenge traditional thinking on leadership.

As I progress with the consortium companies engaged in the [Leadership Performance Project](#) I will continue to share my learning in both articles like this and through white papers. In the [white papers](#) already released, you can find more in-depth information on buffering, how to secure learning in an organisation and much more.

Admittedly, these are only fractions of what constitutes effective leadership, so please do let me have your comments. I’d particularly like to hear about your experiences of which leader behaviours you’ve found are particularly effective in a certain context.