

Special Report

Leadership All The Way Down: empowering your workforce to greater heights



A Special report ExecEdge Consulting
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Introduction

Throughout history there have been numerous influential people lauded as great business leaders, from pioneers of business such as Andrew Carnegie to more contemporary leadership giants such as Bill Gates of Microsoft, or the legendary CEO of GE, Jack Welch. These are the leaders we know, study and respect, leaders who have significant, lasting and very public impact – truly inspirational lives, all. But how relevant is this heroic leadership approach to the majority of decision makers, and the millions of men and women who make up the rank and file in the workforce? It's doubtful that many will have the global impact of these inspirational leaders, since the majority of us have a limited circle of influence. Having said that, it is *still* a circle of influence, and we can *all* leave a legacy, for better or worse, no matter what our impact is in terms of world greatness. Within these parameters, we have a responsibility to make our leadership as effective, significant and memorable as possible in the lives of those we inevitably touch. Creating and building a culture of effective leadership 'all the way down' is an enduring way to achieve this outcome, with benefits flowing both personally and corporately.

Clearly then, it's necessary to understand what makes for effective leadership, in order to encourage and cultivate this approach, from CEOs down to the least skilled workers in any organisation.

Viral Empowerment

At the risk of sounding a little evangelical, 'leadership all the way down' is tantamount to 'empowerment for all the people'. Unfortunately, the concept of empowerment has become hackneyed and lost favour, whether through misuse, misinterpretation, or both.

While it's true that empowerment involves a transfer of decision-making from higher to lower levels, this does not mean that the leadership is in any way diluted. Indeed the contrary applies, for in reality the process of empowering people is less a shift in power than it is an expansion of power. Where the veritable 'pie gets bigger', the broadening boundaries of decision-making must be negotiated and agreed upon. The uncertain-leader eschews empowerment for fear of abrogating their command and control, whereas the

confident leader fosters the taking of personal responsibility for solving problems, creating ideas, and decision-making in all people, and in so doing, strengthens the leadership position. The empowerment model is subtle, and focuses on forming relationships whereby the leader becomes coach, guide, and facilitator, rather than enforcer and dictator.

Forming relationships

The forming of relationships between leaders and empowered individuals can be likened to a functional parent-child relationship. In their early developmental years, a child will generally look to their parents for strong leadership, direction, and guidance, especially for important decisions. However, as the child matures, the responsibility gradually shifts, until the adolescent becomes an adult, and assumes full responsibility. This shift, from an acquiescent to an empowered mindset, inevitably entails some challenges: boundaries are tested, mistakes are made, and parents (leadership) are challenged. Similarly, when an organisation makes the transformation from a command and control model to an empowered leadership model, some push-back is expected. While this can be a testing time for all concerned, the alternative is far more damaging, for if people are not given the opportunity to take some control over their environment, dysfunctional behaviour often ensues. In adolescents, this may result in delinquency, withdrawal, or pathological behaviour. In an organisation, it is most likely to manifest in moronic servitude to policies, or in unproductive demarcation: “Sorry sir, that’s our policy”, or “Sorry Ma’am, that’s someone else’s job.” For leadership to be effective then, experimentation should be supported, errors accepted, and personal responsibility nurtured, in much the same way we gradually empower the maturing adolescent, slowly but surely moving towards an inter-dependent ‘leader-to-leader’ relationship.

Models of leadership

To develop an organisational culture that encourages greater performance, improved efficiency and increased effectiveness, leadership needs to go all the way down; everyone needs to play their part. However, with more than 220 definitions of leadership on offer¹, we can be forgiven for becoming confused and overwhelmed by the various theories of leadership. A review

of the literature shows that these theories can, however, be classified into five broad approaches²:

1. Trait approach: studies such attributes as personality and values that distinguish leaders from followers.
2. Behavioral approach: examines the activities and responsibilities of leaders for the purpose of identifying effective leadership behaviors.
3. Power-influence approach: concerned with the types of power leaders possess and how they exercise this power to influence followers (e.g., in a participative manner or in a more directive manner).
4. Situational approach: investigates the influence of contextual factors like the nature of the task, followers' characteristics, and type of organisation on leadership.
5. Integrative approach: attempts to combine elements of the preceding approaches.

Given so many approaches to leadership, how do we implement a 'grand-theory' of empowerment all the way down? The answer is in the development of what has been termed 'Referent Leaders'. Of all the leadership styles, this is arguably the most compelling, and the most influential. People look to referent leaders primarily because they believe in them. This is true regardless of where these referent leaders sit in the organisational hierarchy. The characteristics of referent leaders are numerous and varied, however research suggests the following are exemplary:

- They have strong vision, values, and beliefs, and behave congruently
- They have the unfailing support of those they lead, and trust them to make important decisions
- They recognise potential, and encourage development in others
- They champion competence, risk-taking, openness, and a sense of fair play
- They have a disdain for inferior results, and mediocre quality
- They are open with self-criticism, and lavish in their recognition of others
- They have high standards of ethics and personal integrity
- They are level-headed and decisive in a crisis, and have the ability to deal with a wide range of complex issues

It's important to note that these characteristics are not the exclusive province of positional leaders. They can be, and are, exhibited by people at all levels within organisations, and most importantly, with the appropriate training, they can be fostered in almost anyone. This means that these leaders can be developed 'all the way down', positioning them to actively drive changes that support and enhance company values and vision in a way that is congruent with personal leadership.

This could be something as complex as guiding the organisation through a merger or restructure, or it could be something as simple as a front-line staffer helping to create a moment of truth for a customer, similar to an experience I had at a hotel in Adelaide.

Referent leadership: a personal experience

I had to fly to Adelaide one evening after a full day's work, to present at a conference the next day, and so when I arrived at my hotel after nearly six hours travelling (including taxi rides), I was feeling fairly exhausted. I had an early start the next day, so I was ready for bed, a fact that was readily apparent to the casual observer. When I asked for my room, only to be told that there had been some 'mix-up' and my room was unavailable, I was primed and ready to become a very disgruntled ex-guest.

"Don't worry Mr Power", said the concierge. *"I can see you're tired. This is my problem, and I'll sort it out."* She then disappeared, but returned a few minutes later and handed me the key to my room. As she did so, she smiled, and said *"I hope you find your new room satisfactory."* I certainly did. To say the room was spacious would be a gross understatement. It was huge, plush, and well-appointed. It would have accommodated my whole family with ease – and we have five kids!

It is *not* someone else's job

The reason more people don't take these kinds of initiatives is because they've been educated to believe that it's someone else's job (SEJ) – it's the manager's job to solve a guest's problem. If the culture of the organisation doesn't encourage, support and champion initiative, innovative thinking and

a focus on delivering solutions, then these people can hardly be blamed for their SEJ approach to everyday situations. In the example I experienced, the concierge clearly felt supported in her actions.

Excluding people from the decision making process, or worse still, involving them and then not acting on their ideas, is a guaranteed way to disengage them. Fortunately, the converse is also true. Workers will be more engaged and more willing to be forthcoming if they're listened to, and their ideas are taken seriously. A fundamental leadership attribute – at any level – is the ability and willingness to listen to, and act on, other peoples' suggestions. Combine this with compelling communication, and miraculous things can happen.

Supporting research for leadership 'all the way down'

Understandably, much leadership research has focussed on high profile 'celebrity leaders' like Carnegie, Welch and Gates. However, a team of researchers from the Gallup Management Group, after surveying more than 200,000 people in leadership and non-leadership roles, concluded that the importance of empowerment lies at a much more localised level³. Their findings demonstrate that for leadership to be effective, it must permeate the entire organisation. The feeling of empowerment comes from knowing that those around you (not just the leader at the apex of the organisation):

1. show interest in, and care about, what you do,
2. provide clear boundaries and guidelines for tasks allocated
3. facilitate the development of the necessary skills to perform the job
4. ensure regular feedback, and recognition of achievement.

Importantly, those surveyed who described their role as 'empowered' returned significant benefits to their respective organisations. Essentially, they provided:

- More profit
- More productivity
- Lower staff turnover
- Higher customer satisfaction ratings

Therefore it's the empowering, referent leader, who adheres to their integrity and values – regardless of his or her position in the organisation – who is the cornerstone of an empowered workforce.

The rise of leadership all the way down

Many organisations that lack the charismatic leadership of a Carnegie, a Welch, or a Gates are driven by disjointed leadership hierarchies. Their disengaged workforce drifts aimlessly, and the absence of personal responsibility leads to a belief that everything is “someone else’s job”, a situation which becomes contagious, and ultimately cancerous. The solution is to foster leadership all the way down, which empowers people with a sense of control over their environment. A sense of control is an important psychological need. This is why incarceration is used as a form of punishment. No control equals no responsibility equals no leadership, but the formula is easily rearranged. When people are given responsibility, the skills to perform their duties, and encouragement, all within clearly defined boundaries, a transformation begins to take place. More responsibility equals more control equals more leadership. And that can only be beneficial for everyone, all the way down.

¹ J.C. Rost, *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1993)

² Gary Yukl, *Leadership in Organisations, 5th ed.* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002)

³ <http://education.gallup.com>