MIT Leadership Center

Leadership in an Age of Uncertainty

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Highlighting Leadership

> Leadership is not solely the responsibility of the CEO, but can and should permeate all levels of the organization.

> Every leader has his or her distinct way of using these capabilities to make change happen. This unique pattern is called a "change signature".

> The capacity for leadership is both individual and collective.

The Romans wondered whether force or inspiration was more effective as a motivator. Our own culture glorifies the charismatic while preaching participation. Interest in this question has only intensified as we watch a new world order unfold in the aftermath of September 11th, and as we are bombarded with images of corporate corruption and attempts at reform. We all hunger to know what leadership is, yet the concept remains amorphous.

The history of leadership theory started with an emphasis on traits—the notion that it is the make-up of the leader that makes all the difference. This approach dominated research up to the late 1940's. Current research suggests that our admired leaders today are honest, inspiring, self-confident, and adaptive. But traits do not always predict leadership effectiveness, and so researchers have shifted to look at the behavior or style of the leader.

This research brief seeks to provide a framework that allows us to integrate prior leadership theories, while focusing on what leaders actually do. It is a framework that views leadership as a capacity that both individuals and groups possess. The framework—developed by four MIT Sloan faculty members, Deborah Ancona, Wanda Orlikowski, Peter Senge and Tom Malone—carries several core assumptions:

LEADERSHIP IS DISTRIBUTED. That is, leadership is not solely the purview of the CEO, but can and should permeate all levels of the firm (Senge, 1996)[1].

LEADERSHIP IS PERSONAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL. There is no single way to lead. The best way to create change is to work with the particular capabilities that you have, while constantly working to improve and expand those capabilities.

LEADERSHIP IS A PROCESS TO CREATE CHANGE. Leadership is about making things happen, contingent on a context. Leaders may create change by playing a central role in the actual change process, or by creating an environment in which others are empowered to act.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPS OVER TIME. It is through practice, reflection, following role models, feedback, and theory that we learn leadership.

Leadership Framework

Visioning

Sensemaking — Relating

Inventing

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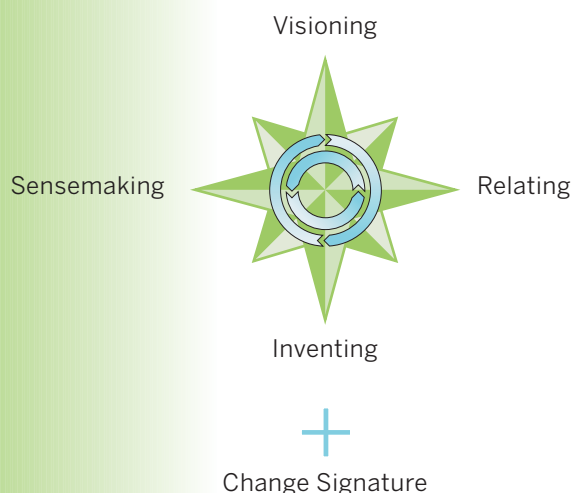
Change Signature

Inventing a Framework in which to Lead

The framework begins with four key leadership capabilities: Sensemaking, Relating, Visioning, and Inventing. Added to these capabilities is the notion of a change "signature" —your own unique way of making change happen. Leaders in business settings need all of these capabilities to be successful, and cycle through them on an ongoing basis.

1) SENSEMAKING (term coined by Karl Weick, 1995[2])**: MAKING SENSE OF THE WORLD AROUND US.**
The act of Sensemaking is discovering the new terrain as you are inventing it. In the very process of mapping the new terrain, you are creating it. Building on the work of Sutcliffe and Weick, 2002[3], here are some tips for Sensemaking:
> Seek many types and sources of data;
> Involve others in your sensemaking;
> Do not simply apply your existing frameworks and overlay them on the situation;
> Move beyond stereotypes;
> Learn from small experiments; and
> Use images, metaphors, or stories to try to capture and communicate critical elements of your map.

2) RELATING: DEVELOPING KEY RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN AND ACROSS ORGANIZATIONS. Leadership is not an individual sport, and in our networked age the ability to connect and build trusting relationships is a key competency. While leaders try to create trust, optimism, and harmony, they often get anger, cynicism, and conflict instead. The core capability of relating centers on the leader's ability to engage in inquiry, advocacy, and connecting. Inquiry and advocacy are terms coined in the pioneering work of Chris Argyris and Don Schon (1996)[4], as well Peter Senge (1990)[5]. In order to enable effective interpersonal relationships, both practices are necessary.

Inquiry means the ability to listen and understand what others are thinking and feeling. It also involves trying to understand how the other person has moved from data to interpretation to assessment, rather than simply reacting to the assessment itself. It requires the leader to suspend judgment and to listen without imposing his/her personal point of view. And yet leadership requires having opinions and taking a stand.

The second area of relating is advocacy. This involves taking a stand and trying to influence others of its merits while also being open to alternative views (Pfeffer, 1992)[6]. It means taking responsibility for your own biases and leaps to judgment while being able to say, "I was wrong, I jumped to conclusions based on insufficient data and overreacted." Yet often in business there is a great deal more advocacy than inquiry. Sometimes we are so busy trying to push our own ideas that we do not really listen to what others are saying.

The third area of relating is connecting. It is the ability to build collaborative relationships with others and to create coalitions for change. Tips for effective connecting are:
> Understand the perspective of others within the organization and withhold judgment while listening to them;
> Encourage others to voice their opinions;
> Be clear about your stand and how you reached it;
> Think about how others might react to your idea and how you might best explain it to them; and
> Think about your connections.

3) VISIONING: CREATING A COMPELLING VISION OF THE FUTURE. While sensemaking creates a map of what is, visioning is a map of what could be. Visions are important because they provide the motivation for people to give up their current views and ways of working in order to change. Perhaps most importantly, visioning provides people with a sense of meaning about their work. It answers the question "why am I doing this?" Thus good leaders are able to frame visions in a way that emphasizes their importance along some key value dimensions. Tips for effective Visioning are:

> Develop a vision about something that excites you or that you think is important;
> Frame the vision with an ideological goal;
> Use stories, metaphors and analogies to paint a vivid picture of what the vision will accomplish;
> Practice creating a vision in many arenas;
> Enable co-workers by pointing out that they have the skills and capabilities needed to realize the vision; and
> Embody the key values and ideas contained in the vision— "walk the talk."

4) INVENTING: CREATING NEW WAYS OF WORKING TOGETHER. Inventing entails creating the processes and structures needed to make the vision a reality. It involves implementing the steps needed to achieve our vision of the future. Tips for effective inventing include:

> Maintain focus on improving the ways that people work together in your team and organization;
> When a new task or change effort emerges, think through how it will get done—who will do what, by when, and in what configuration;
> Play with new and different ways of organizing work— examine alternative ways of grouping people together, organizing their internal interaction, and linking across different groups;
> Blend sensemaking and inventing.

The four capabilities of sensemaking, relating, visioning and inventing are complementary. Without inventing, visions may remain dreams that never get realized. Inventing without a clear sense of the current situation and where you want to go can result in chaos. People want to know that they are operating with an accurate map of reality, not one that is outdated or based on wishful thinking. They also want to know that they are working for something that is important. Finally, while visions and new structures can result in great activity, without a base of people who are committed to working together towards the goal, any success may be short-lived.

These capabilities can also create tensions that need to be managed. It is difficult to hold an image of the future and the present simultaneously. Balancing people and processes, action and understanding, individual and collective aspirations, can be challenging. Yet it is inherent in the framework that managing these very tensions is the essence of leadership.

While individuals need to exercise all four capabilities they must also work with others who complement their skill portfolio. In this way leadership can be shared among many. Where one might be planning the future, another is working with others to invent ways to improve current operations. Thus, leadership is both individual and collective.

Developing a Signature Style

The four capabilities, like the compass that they form, are only a tool. It is the change signature that determines how and what the tool is used for. While the capabilities focus on what leaders do, the change signature is about who a leader is. It develops slowly based on experience and skills. It is a key part of the leadership model because it represents who we are as leaders.

By engaging in these activities over time leaders begin to develop their own distinct way of making things happen. Through a variety of experiences leaders can further develop their capabilities, build leadership capacity in an organization, and create a better understanding of their own values and skills.

Each person's change signature, like a fingerprint, is unique. Each person brings his/her unique values, skills, experience, tactics, and personality to the role of leader. Each person has his/her personal way of making change happen, although there certainly are patterns across individuals. The change signature is made up of a credo and the characteristic way in which the leader creates change. The term "credo" refers to a person's core values and beliefs both for themselves and for their organization (this concept is built on that of Kouzes and Posner, 1993)[7].

The second aspect of the change signature is the way an individual typically embodies the four capabilities and the characteristic way in which that person makes change happen. For example, what are the skills, abilities, tactics and modes of operating that characterize how you carry out your leadership activities? Some people might carry out sensemaking in a very interpersonal manner, moving from office to office learning from everyone they meet. For others it might be a purely analytic process that starts and ends on the computer. Leaders learn through experiences what is most important to them and how they can be most effective with others. This process is facilitated when leaders take the time to reflect on their experiences. Often people report that they learn more from failure than success, but all experience can help shed light on what kind of leader you are.

Leadership, as presented here, is a combination of four capabilities and a change signature. It is distributed across individuals, and involves sensemaking, relating, visioning and inventing. By engaging in these activities over time leaders begin to develop their own distinct way of making things happen. Through a variety of experiences leaders can further develop their capabilities, build leadership capacity in an organization, and create a better understanding of their own values and skills.

NOTES

1. Senge, P. 1996. "Leading Learning Organizations: The Bold, the Powerful, and the Invisible." In F. Hesselbein, et al., *The Leader of the Future*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

2. Weick, K. 1995. *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

3. Sutcliffe, K., and K. Weick. 2002. "Managing the Unexpected: Assuring High Performance in an Age of Complexity." *European Management Journal*, 20, pp. 709-710.

4. Argyris, C. and Schön, D. 1996. *Organizational learning II: Theory, method and practice.* Reading, Mass: Addison Wesley.

5. Senge, P., 1990. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday.

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7. Kouzes, J. and B. Posner. 1993. *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It, Why People Demand It.* San-Francisco: Jossey-Bass.