

## Re-thinking Relevant, Responsible and Professional Leadership+

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In order to better cope with contemporary challenges and address related opportunities many professionals may need to re-think their attitudes to leadership and the combination of leadership techniques and perspectives that might be appropriate in different situations and contexts (Coulson-Thomas, 2021a & b). Expectations and requirements of colleagues, clients and other stakeholders are changing. Increasingly, more collective, inclusive, responsible and sustainable approaches may be required from leaders of professional assignments, projects, teams and organisations. Leadership styles may need to be reviewed and refreshed.

Forms of leadership can be necessary, developed and provided in a variety of situations and circumstances. Community, corporate and team leadership and business, professional, social, political, scientific, intellectual, moral, thought and other forms of leadership can overlap. They can also be combined in different ways according to changing requirements. From time to time professionals should review the nature of the leadership they and colleagues provide in the contexts in which they hold appointments, have responsibilities and exert influence.

### Professional Leadership

Professionals may be expected to give a lead in suggesting courses of action and solutions to problems in areas in which they have particular expertise, knowledge and competence. Their clients and others who are reliant upon their advice, counsel and judgements will hope that they remain objective and behave responsibly and in accordance with relevant codes of professional conduct (Carr-Saunders et al, 1933; Coulson-Thomas, 2015). Professional bodies in turn may be expected to ensure their codes of practice and their members along with the tools and techniques they use remain current and relevant.

Traditionally, the senior members of some professions have played an important role in providing training opportunities for those seeking to qualify and subsequent mentoring and support in the early stages of their careers. Continuing professional development has become more important in an era of discontinuity, transition and transformation enabled by new technologies and business models, in which different approaches may be required in the light of emerging challenges and additional possibilities. Professionals should remain up-to-date.

Leadership may be needed at all levels in organisations and across their network of relationships. Some professionals aspire to community leadership and corporate governance roles. Directors and boards need to know what types of leadership to exercise and/or delegate to whom and when and where, and also in what form and for how long. Those for whom they are responsible should be clear about what is expected of them and properly supported and appropriately monitored. The potential to make a significant difference can exist throughout a company. Good ideas and promising initiatives can arise in many places.

### Corporate Leadership

Many directors are members of professional bodies. Heading up certain functions can represent a route to the boardroom for those with directorial qualities. The CEO is the person often associated with corporate leadership, although acting within the framework of direction, values, purpose, policies and priorities established by a board of directors. While the business of the board is conducted by its chairman, the CEO leads the executive team. The roles of Board chair and CEO may involve different but ideally complementary forms of leadership.

The quality of board decisions can reflect the calibre of the advice and counsel they receive from professionals, whether as executive or independent directors, consultants or employees. In certain companies, the boundaries between board and executive leadership sometimes overlap, especially in evolving situations. Compatible personalities and aligned perspectives sometimes allow joint or collective leadership, but these can be difficult to sustain. Dialogue and a good working relationship between those involved are desirable.

Effective leadership involves mutual respect and trust between leaders and those who are led. It can benefit from good relations between key players and important stakeholders. While issues and differences remain unresolved, leadership voices may need to display a united front to the external world until a consensus is reached and a common position can be agreed and shared. This may require listening leadership that is sensitive to changing stakeholder concerns and priorities and relational leadership, or taking the initiative and being responsive in building mutually beneficial relationships with them (Coulson-Thomas, 2014).

#### Avoiding Excessive Leadership

On occasion, heavy handed and insecure leaders intervene and interfere when and where this may not be required. Some teams can be trusted to get on with the implementation of an agreed strategy without directors or senior managers looking over their shoulders. People can be over-led. They might need space to grow, become accountable and do what they feel is best. Excessive top down leadership and continual chivvying and harrying can stifle initiative, inhibit creativity and prevent responsible risk-taking, where lighter touch leadership might reduce anxiety, encourage debate and stimulate innovation.

The cult of personality that sometimes accompanies individualistic and self-promoting leaders can overshadow others and lead them to withdraw into themselves. At times of discontinuity and uncertainty new ideas and initiatives may need to be sought. More democratic forms of leadership can encourage engagement, increase involvement, widen participation, stimulate contribution and ensure greater diversity. Secure personalities who are open to ideas and develop and support others, and who invite challenge rather than try to avoid questioning can enlist interest, commitment and support.

It may be necessary to build a shared purpose and a consensus for moving forward. For the best results, such an approach should include key customers, important suppliers and business partners whose active contributions are likely to be essential for success. It might need to be accompanied by a review of governance arrangements and mechanisms for ensuring the alignment of aims and priorities, the raising of issues and the settling of disputes. There may

also be implications for the management and distribution of intellectual property and the sharing of financial rewards to consider.

### Individual and Collective Leadership

Charismatic leadership might be welcomed by those who like to be led, but may not be everyone's cup of tea. After a time, some strong personalities can grate. On occasion, charismatic leaders can serve their purpose but resist efforts to replace them. Some get such a taste for being in the limelight that they hang on like limpets. Investors, independent directors, electorates and practice partners should be alert to leaders who overstay their welcome, keep rivals down, block challenges and begin to exhibit the attributes of a tyrant.

Dictators can be particularly difficult to remove. Should a revolt or revolution succeed, they may be followed by a power vacuum and instability. Authoritarian, dominant and exploitative forms of leadership are not in tune with contemporary requirements for caring commitment, environmental awareness and concern, and agility, flexibility and sensitivity. People tend to resent being used and either taken advantage of or taken for granted. They are less likely to go the extra mile when required to do so, but more likely to jump ship as and when a better opportunity appears or an escape route arises.

More consensual forms of leadership may be better at holding people together, but when a window of opportunity to act is rapidly diminishing this should not be at the expense of decisive leadership. Procrastination and impulsiveness should both be avoided. Servant, supportive and enabling leadership can work well in more stable situations, when the people of an organisation know what is required to succeed. In periods of uncertainty and flux, more than monitoring, reacting to requests for help and taking pride in not interfering may be required. In certain crisis situations and for a period, central direction may be needed.

### Imposition and Consent

Many professional practices monitor their own standards and many professionals agree to observe certain values and standards of conduct. They voluntarily sign up to codes of professional practice and expect to be investigated when they fall short of what is expected. They may consent to being judged by their professional peers. They may understand the role of sensible and proportionate regulations in protecting their clients and members of the wider public. They might also recognise that the activities of a deviant minority can harm the reputations of the majority of practitioners and the trust that people place in them.

The authority, legitimacy and resilience of some constitutions are rooted in consent. The doctrine of collective responsibility is a key element of cabinet Government and the exercise of some forms of political leadership. Collective leadership that embraces a competent executive team and to which they contribute can be particularly effective at encouraging ownership and commitment. Individual partners may expect to have a say in the important decisions of a professional partnership, while agreeing to be bound by majority decisions.

Leadership that is imposed or deemed to be unconstitutional and to which people are subjected, can result in passive responses, reduced performance and /or opposition and

resistance. The active involvement of other people can result in a more participative form of leadership. Co-operation with other entities and co-creation can stimulate a requirement for more collaborative or shared leadership. These tend to last longer if responsibilities and costs are equitably shared. Might one see the emergence of mechanisms similar to those used for the governance and leadership of alliances between states or international organisations?

### Adapting and Evolving Approaches

In order to remain relevant, leadership should adapt and evolve to reflect changing requirements, situations and priorities (Coulson-Thomas, 2020a). It may be necessary to change gear, move in a new direction, confront a technological revolution, or transition to a different business model. Incremental improvement might not be enough. People may have to be challenged, inspired and encouraged, rather than be largely left alone because of past achievements. Untapped potential may need to be released, innovation triggered and new elements introduced. A more entrepreneurial approach to leadership may be required.

Sometimes an approach to leadership may need to be better aligned to that of joint venture or consortium partners, or the imperatives of a national policy or international agreement. A change of style may be required to match that of a key customer with which a company wishes to become a longer-term strategic partner and work more closely. Legal and regulatory changes, Government policy initiatives and international agreements sometimes have implications for how business leaders are expected to behave and respond.

Professionals should understand that the most relevant course of action and the best solution can depend upon the situation and circumstances. Each case can have particular factors that need to be taken into account. When considering which approach or approaches to corporate leadership to adopt, directors should revisit their company's mission and purpose and also what they are collectively trying to achieve. The style that is selected might be more appropriate if it viewed as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself.

### Recent and Emerging Trends

As organisations become more fluid, open, flexible and responsive, opportunities are shared and more mutually beneficial relationships are forged, some forms of leadership are in decline. Top down and centrally controlled leadership has been challenged by more consensual and inclusive approaches, especially where people are critical elements of corporate success. However, tight control by small groups may still exist as more business models are adopted where activities are contracted out and/or automated. When key tasks are undertaken by algorithms, these and those who create them can become the critical resources.

Command and control approaches to leadership may still exist in more stable contexts where routine activities and prescribed standards persist. However, other approaches more suited to contemporary requirements may continue to emerge as situations change. Additional models may be latent and might emerge. Leadership has traditionally been viewed in terms of the handling of people. It may evolve as more activities are undertaken by digital and other

technologies. Scientific and technological leadership may become the priority with many of the fewer people involved undertaking technology support and maintenance tasks.

Professionals should avoid becoming prisoners of conventional wisdom (Galbraith, 1958). Thought and practice leadership can advance a profession and ensure continuing relevance. In fluid situations, such as when there is a change of status or business model, or during a transition or transformation journey, permanent, fixed and inherited leadership arrangements and personnel may require review. Owners and other stakeholders may step in to trigger and force changes. Interim or temporary leadership arrangements may be needed to ensure the agility and flexibility to cope with a succession of stages, challenges and/or opportunities.

### Horses for Courses

Availability, succession issues and divisions over longer-term direction are among the circumstances that can give rise to rotating leadership. Events such as a takeover or insolvency can result in the replacement of some or all members of a leadership team. Some changes might trigger a search for different leadership approaches, experience and qualities. For example, a leader of major and mission critical transformation projects on tight timescales might have experience and qualities the head of a stable business might lack.

Crisis leadership may demand a particular skill set (Allison and Zelikow, 1999). The experience of the Covid-19 pandemic is that certain leaders are less willing to listen to specialist advice and follow scientific guidance than their peers. Some organisations face so many inter-related challenges that someone with programme management experience covering a portfolio of complex projects may be more suitable than a person who has led a homogenous entity on what has been closer to a single corporate mission.

On occasion, radical change and/or urgent action may be required. Business as usual might not be an acceptable option. Aspects of subversive or revolutionary leadership might be practiced by some members of either an existing or an alternative leadership group. A promising venture may need to be protected. Revisionists might wish to advance an initiative that is opposed by vested interests and supporters of a status-quo. Liberating leadership could endeavour to release pent-up forces for change.

### Specialist Leadership

Some specialist organisations require particular forms of leadership. Spiritual leadership might be sought by the members of a religious organisation that has traditionally looked for obedience rather than people who think for themselves. On the other hand, ethical or moral leadership and leadership by example might be welcome in a wider range of organisations. A failure to observe certain values rather than incompetence might be a reason for seeking a new broom and replacing an incumbent leader. .

Certain families can exert considerable influence in some countries, communities and other contexts. Some family members accustomed to family leadership of a family owned company might use their power of patronage to limit selection to older close relatives who follow local traditions rather than look more broadly, or at a younger generation that may have been

educated abroad. Inter-generational tensions sometimes arise. The prospects of certain family companies may depend upon whether governance arrangements are utilised to ensure continuing control or to widen the leadership gene pool and open up new possibilities.

In some countries and societies, corruption, nepotism and favouritism abound and leadership is compromised. Elsewhere and to help prevent such a situation, public leadership positions must be openly advertised, with independent observers scrutinising selection processes. Public body and service leadership roles may require professionals who might already be subject to professional standards and a code of practice to also commit to certain additional ethical values, such as the Seven Principles of Public Life (Nolan Committee, 1995).

### Problematic Approaches

Absent, ineffectual or weak leadership can lead to drift and delay. However, sometimes when leadership appointment decisions are taken, those on nomination and selection committees over-react. They also over compensate. In trying to address what they feel has been lacking, they go too far in a different direction. Balanced leadership may be more likely to be accepted by those concerned and to last. Appointments should also take account of emerging developments, future expectations, legitimacy requirements and longer-term aspirations.

There may be few business advocates of the delusional leadership that is sometimes found in the political environment. While determined and focused leadership might have more appeal, directors need to think through what the determination and focus should be applied to. Those who advocate responsible and responsive corporate leadership should clarify to whom a board should be responsible and accountable and what they should be responsive to.

Certain companies and other organisations seem to recruit a succession of people with similar attributes and educational and/or social backgrounds. When assembling candidates to be considered and short-listed, those who desire a more inclusive and diverse leadership cadre should cast the net more widely. Greater diversity can be conducive of creativity and innovation. It might also better reflect the make-up of stakeholder groups and increase the confidence of those who identify with particular members of a leadership team.

### Leadership Changes

The tenure of some leadership roles can be relatively short. Those who trigger or enforce changes at the top should think through their implications for the people of an organisation and its stakeholders. Changing the allegiances of those who are led, their perspectives and approaches, and an organisation's values and culture may take much longer. Leadership changes can be disruptive and unsettling. Sometimes they create unrealistic expectations. Maintaining confidence among those affected may require careful communication.

In uncertain times and during and after periods of restriction and lockdown, caring and helpful leaders who have endeavoured to provide physical security and safe and healthy working environments might turn their attention to mental illness and the provision of emotional support. Some approaches to leadership are complementary. Others could

represent alternatives that are in different positions on a spectrum. A balance might need to be struck, for example between proactive and reactive leadership.

Climate change and environmental, pandemic and sustainability challenges might necessitate a review of corporate purpose. The value of purposeful leadership for engaging younger generations, building empathy and securing commitment can depend upon the nature of the purpose that is articulated. It might also benefit from involving key stakeholders in the formulation or selection of a corporate purpose. It can be particularly relevant when there is a significant change of direction, purpose and priorities.

### Innovation and Pragmatism

Innovative leadership might be an approach that is different, distinctive or necessary for some organisations (Coulson-Thomas, 2020c). It may be essential for a particular business, or at a certain stage in the development of an enterprise, to overcome a constraint or open up new possibilities. It could be an ad hoc change to address a challenge or seize an opportunity, or a more lasting requirement for coping with an altered situation, a significant alteration of circumstances, requirements or resources, or to enable a transition or transformation.

Where innovation, enterprise and entrepreneurship are required, more attention may need to be given to inspiration and imagination, breaking down barriers to creativity, discovery and experimentation, and giving people greater freedom to explore, invent and test. Instinctive leadership involves doing what seems appropriate and following one's senses and instincts, rather than using a rulebook and selecting a particular approach. When difficult choices and tough decisions are required, the exercise of leadership should be considered, dispassionate and objective, and also courageous when required.

Pragmatic leadership could be a means of coping, or doing the best one can at a moment in time in reaction to particular market or other pressures. It could also be a practical way of combining whatever elements of other approaches might seem relevant in an evolving situation. At a time of insecurity and uncertainty, it may seem more sensible than attempting to adopt or develop an approach that might not stand the test of time. Prudent leaders might also try alternatives, avoid dead ends and endeavour to keep certain options open.

### Contemporary and Future Leadership

Over time, some leaders lose their mojo, go off the rails or fancy a change. Replacement or successor leadership might be required for many reasons. Leadership succession should be regularly reviewed, especially in dynamic situations and as incumbents approach the ends of their terms of office. Self-awareness, or an independent and external review might, suggest that a refresh and new blood would be welcome and should be prepared for. There might also be barriers that block access to leadership positions by certain groups to be removed.

Given the imperative of more sustainable business practices and lifestyles, more responsible corporate leadership and responsible innovation are required (Coulson-Thomas, 2020b). Regardless of the approach to leadership that people feel most comfortable with, or that they are good at, environmental degradation, carbon emissions and over-exploitation of natural

capital must be reduced. Innovation and its initiation, enabling and adoption are essential for tackling many issues in the 'too difficult' or 'for later' category (Coulson-Thomas, 2020c).

However relentless incremental change might be, it is unlikely to be enough. In the time available before it will be too late, rapid transition, transformation and innovation in areas from carbon capture to alternative materials must occur. While Government regulation, intervention and other activities can sometimes inhibit and hinder the diversity, vibrancy and experimentation needed for innovation, the capabilities for making it happen are largely within the private sector and dependent upon the direction and leadership provided by boards.

### Responsible Leadership

Responsible leaders support the people for whom they are responsible. They ensure they understand the rationale for what is being sought and that they are equipped and enabled to accomplish what is expected of them. They build their potential, capability and contribution. Leaders who are professionals also have opportunities to serve voluntary and charitable organisations. Professional bodies depend upon such selfless service to achieve and/or maintain relevance and recognition for the benefit of practitioners and their clients.

Is the form of leadership that you and your colleagues practice appropriate for what you are collectively seeking to accomplish and your situation and context? Does it reflect wider environmental, inclusion and sustainability aspirations and concerns? Does it need to be reviewed and renewed or revitalised? How is it perceived by those you lead and seek to benefit? Are they both supportive of your aims and finding the journey enriching? How will you be remembered by them? What new choices, options and possibilities are you creating?

Responsible leaders act in the best long-term interests of an organisation and its stakeholders. They also take account of the interests of future generations by addressing shared challenges such as environmental damage and the loss of bio-diversity, safeguarding natural capital and tackling global warming and climate change. They try to avoid missed opportunities and they endeavour to ensure organisational objectives are supportive of UN Sustainable Development Goals. Finally, they allow others to derive benefit, satisfaction and fulfilment from their endeavours and they equitably share and celebrate collective successes.

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