



Spinning The Leadership Engine

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What are core leadership behaviors that help you become a more effective leader? Which ‘engine’ drives these behaviors? And, what are effective leadership development practices? To answer these questions, we explore a progressive approach to leadership development, where people and organizational development are seen as two sides of the same coin, offering a solid framework for flexible development programs and improved leadership effectiveness.

1. The essence of leadership

There is growing interest in the topic of leadership, with a multitude of books, blogs, TED talks, presentations and seminars emerging on the topic. But as Jeffrey Pfeffer states in “Getting beyond the BS of leadership literature” (<http://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/leadership/getting-beyond-the-bs-of-leadership-literature>), it seems that the better leadership examples are detailing the evolution of leadership, illustrating that leadership is an evolving behavior (not a role) that can be developed. But, what behavior should we focus on?

According to McKinsey, there are four types of core leadership behaviours - ‘solving problems’, ‘seeking different perspectives’, ‘supporting others’ and ‘operating with a strong results orientation’ – which form a critical part of organizational health and are seen to be important drivers of shareholder returns. If we divide these core leadership behaviours into a **cognitive aspect** (thinking part of leadership), an **interrelational aspect** (interacting part of leadership) and an **executional aspect** (doing part of leadership), it appears that:

- ‘Seeking perspectives’ and ‘solving problems’ are cognitive abilities (although perspective seeking can relate to the willingness to interact and look for the opinions of others),
- ‘supporting others’ is an interrelational ability, and
- ‘operating with a results orientation’ is an execution ability.

A 2014 Huffpost Business (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/j-v-crum-iii/envision-engage-and-execu_b_5516587.html) article introduced a leadership model to aid effective leadership development by addressing three skills of conscious leaders: **envisioning**, **engaging** and **executing**. These skills resemble three of the four core leadership behaviors suggested by McKinsey.

- **Envisioning** resembles the cognitive aspect: seeking different perspectives, dealing with both risks as well as opportunities, setting the direction by foreseeing a future environment and grasping changes.
- **Engaging** resembles the interrelational aspect: supporting others, understanding how systems drive behavior, how to create networks of people and allocate resources to accomplish an agenda.
- **Executing** resembles operating with a results orientation: understanding one's self and others, acting decisively, challenging habits and routines, delegating and ensuring initiatives are implemented.

Here again we see three dimensions recurring: one related to thinking, one related to interacting and one related to doing. Which leaves the fourth aspect: 'solving problems', the cognitive ability to give meaning, make decisions and solve problems for those you lead. Given that leadership always happens in context, and that contexts differ in complexity, different contexts pose different challenges and require different problem solving capabilities.

Leadership is the ability to seek different perspectives and set the direction, to allocate resources and engage people in that direction and to get things done, driven by our evolving ability to handle complexity, make appropriate decisions and solve problems. Leaders need to have the right 'problem solving capability' to be effective leaders.

Is our problem solving capability the engine that drives leadership?

2. Aligning leadership behaviour and potential

In our previous post – How Potential Unfolds into the Future (<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-potential-unfolds-future-stefan-peetroons-accord-group>) – we outlined how potential is a person's capability to judge and handle complexity, to solve problems and make decisions. It exists independently of knowledge and experience, and independently of skills, motivation and personality. This problem solving (or mental processing) capability is innate and matures over a person's entire life. It refers to how big a role one can handle, having of course acquired the skilled knowledge to do the work, value the work and function maturely in it.

Knowing when people will naturally evolve in terms of problem solving capability allows us to plan and prepare for this. People will look for career progression opportunities aligned with their problem solving capability. It's important to differentiate between leadership behavior and potential, where 'leadership behavior' is a latent set of skills you can develop (envisioning, engaging, executing), and 'leadership potential' relates to our evolving problem solving ability.

Leadership development needs to address behavior aligned to the evolution of potential and problem solving ability. In 'Six Levels of Leadership' (<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/six-levels-leadership-stefan-peetroons-accord-group>), this is expressed at different organisational management levels:

- **Team leaders** look to optimally respond to individual demands. They focus on service delivery and satisfaction. Their problem solving capability allows them to keep the overview, manage the process and strive for results by reaching higher service levels for individuals.
- **Managers** will focus on incremental improvement, reduce costs and increase efficiency (prior to service delivery). Their problem solving capability allows them to manage the system and align processes to maximize profit or resources in a given context.
- At the **strategic development** level, leaders seek to differentiate. They focus on how contexts evolve and anticipate trends. Their problem solving capability allows them to tap new sources of growth by looking for new methods or systems that respond to upcoming changes.

When planning for leadership development, and acknowledging that managerial leadership happens at different levels of complexity in organizations, it's important to align the context that has to be managed with the 'problem solving capability' required to deliver in that context.

3. Spinning the leadership engine

Leadership development – for team leaders, managers or directors – requires different insights adapted to their problem solving capability, addressing recurring themes of envisioning (strategic alignment), engaging (operational management) and executing (self & team management).

- **Developing 'envisioning'** requires insights into different contexts wherein managerial leaders operate – insight into the context of both those who they report to and those who report to them, understanding the leader's added value in relation to higher and lower levels.
- **Developing 'engaging'** requires insights into how to optimize the organizational (business unit) and functional design to create a network of people and allocate resources more effectively – understanding how systems will drive behavior and facilitate relationship building.
- **Developing 'executing'** requires insight into one's problem solving capability, personal values and drivers, personality traits, skills and competences, understanding what the impact is on the relationship with others and developing 'meaningful conversations' with all stakeholders.

Leadership development, based on problem solving ability in context, provides organizations an approach to address the ever-changing environmental challenges they face through the optimal use of people's potential over time. The starting point to leadership development is seeing organizations and people as two sides of the same coin. As such, leadership and organizational development go hand in hand. Additionally, we need to better understand the role 'problem solving ability' (or potential) plays when developing behavior.

About Stefan Peetroons

Stefan is a consultant at Accord Group Belgium. Our vision is to be a source of inspiration for people and organizations to stimulate the development of their identity. Our mission: building resilient organizations where people, work & strategy are balanced with the purpose to create value.