

Debunking the Leadership Myth - The Market Mogul

themarketmogul.com/leadership-myth/

Across the financial services world, everyone seems to be talking about employee engagement as the key to [higher productivity](#), efficiency, risk reduction and financial performance. The thinking goes, 'if only we had leaders who could engage, who had better EQ or better communication skills, the issue would be solved'. But what if this isn't a top-down problem at all? What if it isn't an absence of leadership but an absence of "followship"?

While EQ, compassion and communication are essential skills for a leader, of equal importance are the beliefs, feelings and behaviours of the followers. And while leadership is complex and nuanced, there are only really three key elements to making followship easier.

Muddled Messages Prevent Follower Engagement

The first step to overcoming the leadership myth lies in one's ability to have absolute clarity of purpose shared in such a way that it is relevant and motivating to everyone. Put simply, why is this thing, whatever it is, needed, and why does this matter to me? This sounds exceedingly obvious but, in most large organisations, clarity of 'why' is a rare commodity. Senior management often describe any initiative in ambiguous and often unaligned terms. They rarely communicate purpose. They rarely define context. Yet, to quote [Reed Hastings of Netflix](#) "the best managers figure out how to get great outcomes by setting the appropriate context, rather than by trying to control their people".

Clarity and congruence of purpose creates engagement. If messages are muddled or mundane it's hard to engage as a follower. It's a big reason that initiatives don't gain traction.

Value Is Found in the Grass Roots

Secondly, ownership must not exclusively rest with the senior team. Most companies develop initiatives in the senior echelons of the business then launch them on an unsuspecting workforce. There is then a natural pushback. The human reaction is to resist change of any kind. Employees, therefore, concentrate on why the initiative won't work. This is a huge waste of time and energy dissipated in negativity and water-cooler dissent.

To facilitate a sense of ownership, leaders must instead structure, and allow time for, a process of early involvement from people right down the business before a "launch" is contemplated. Creating a process that is iterative rather than directive creates a sense of ownership. And ownership is the source of engagement. It's actually how most good entrepreneurial businesses do it.

So, how many people need to be involved? To achieve absolute buy-in and unstoppable change 15% of people need to feel some degree of ownership through involvement in the creative process. It's a big change in approach for most large organisations. But the benefits don't end with the achievement of passionate engagement and adoption of your initiative. You'll also get a far better solution as pitfalls are ironed out as the initiative develops. As one CEO remarked recently 'I am always aware that in every meeting I attend I am always the least informed person in the room. And it is the same with all my department heads in their meetings. The value and knowledge in the business sits at the grass roots. And yet we expect all the solutions to come from the top.'

Trust: The Most Contagious Virus

Thirdly, trust is absolutely key to followship. It's a simple truth that people will not follow when they do not trust or, crucially, feel trusted.

According to neuro-economist Paul Zak, "building a culture of trust is what makes a meaningful difference.

Employees in high-trust organisations report 74% less stress, 106% more energy at work, 50% higher productivity, 13% fewer sick days, 76% more engagement, 29% more satisfaction with their lives, 40% less burnout”.

According to PwC, 55% of CEOs think that a lack of trust is a threat to their organisation’s growth.

So, how does one build trust in a large and complex organisation? The answer is that eventually, everyone in the organisation needs to be involved in developing a new way of behaving. [Jeff Weiner at LinkedIn](#) talks about the necessity of a whole organisation learning the skills of compassionate management.

In a large organisation this sounds terrifyingly onerous. But trust is actually the most contagious of viruses. Most businesses, like LinkedIn, have found that you start with a discrete and manageable group and through a process of engagement, education and coaching transform their beliefs and behaviours. With consistency and support, the trust bug slowly spreads and once 15% of people in the organisation are working with compassion the change is unstoppable,

But what are compassionate behaviours? It’s not really rocket science. In his great book ‘Trust Factor: The Science of Creating High-Performance Companies’, Paul Zak identifies eight factors that build a high trust environment. These can be summarised as the following: frequent praise and recognition; setting clear expectations and holding everyone to account on these; allowing maximum autonomy and encouraging self-management; being open with information; demonstrating care and investing in personal and professional growth; and encouraging complete authenticity.

There’s a whole industry based on developing great leadership. Perhaps we should spend a bit more time thinking about great followship. And for followship to take root, organisations need to fundamentally rethink their whole top-down, command and control methodology and instead build an organisational culture based on ownership and trust and with a clear and agreed purpose providing clarity and context.

The skills of leadership are critical in today’s complex and ambiguous business world. But it is not enough. To create real engagement, agility and velocity right across the organisation it’s time we thought much more about the skills of followship.