



The same but different

Old models and approaches are being continually repackaged, but does leadership thinking really have anything new to offer in 2019?

Writing

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Setting aside President Trump, it appears we are slowly but surely moving away from the ubiquitous image of the 'pale, male and stale' leader. Today we are starting to embrace a more inclusive ideology of what a leader could, and should, look like.

The rising popularity of certain leadership models over the last few decades has contributed to this shift. These leadership models include:

- **Agile:** an adaptive, flexible, resilient leadership style based on being able to respond quickly to unfolding situations.
- **Co-leadership:** where two people, who ideally have different strengths and weaknesses, share responsibility.
- **Collaborative:** where leadership takes place across functional and organisational boundaries.
- **Distributed:** where leadership is distributed among a team of individuals.

- **Humble:** treating others with respect, regardless of their position, role or title.

- **Inclusive:** this is a people-oriented leadership approach that focuses on leaders challenging their own biases and appreciating the contributions of others.

- **Rotating:** where different members of a team adopt leadership positions at different times.

Another leadership model that has enjoyed a revival in recent times is servant leadership. First mooted by US management writer Robert Greenleaf in 1970, it is based on the philosophy that a leader's main objective is to serve. Servant leadership continues to be practised today by leaders such as Tony Hsieh, chief executive of online shoe and clothing company Zappos.

Technological advances and shifting demographic trends are also influencing some of the emerging leadership models that we see. For example, reverse mentoring (where  chief executives are mentored by junior

employees) is becoming a more popular approach within blue-chip companies. Professional services firm KPMG, software giant Microsoft and super-market chain Tesco have all implemented reverse mentoring schemes in recent years.

Other companies are investing in the wisdom of ‘elders’, to help create a more diverse and mature working environment. In 2013, Silicon Valley design company IDEO hired an 89-year-old designer, Barbara Beskind, to help create tech products for older people. Meanwhile, almost a quarter of the engineers and consultants at science design firm Animal Dynamics are 65 or older.

Stuart Duff, a partner at business psychology firm Pearn Kandola, says the range of different leadership models that exist today is reflective of the economic and political outlook. “The current climate is often referred to as being volatile, uncertain, complex and/or ambiguous (VUCA). We used to talk to leaders about ‘anticipating what might appear on the horizon’ and thinking ahead.



© THE YOUNG LEADER

Jack Parsons, the 25-year-old chief executive of the Big Youth Group consultancy, was named ‘Young Digital Leader of the Year’ in 2017 and the ‘Most Connected Young Entrepreneur.’ In fact, he is so well connected that his personal advisory group includes the chief operating officer of Google.

Parsons admits that his age has “raised a few eyebrows” and that he’s had to banish misconceptions about what a leader in 2019 should look like. It’s a challenge, he says, to “gain respect from those who have preconceptions about you and what age should you be when you’re a chief executive”.

No one, says Parsons, regardless of their age or experience, can predict every challenge or obstacle that they might have to overcome. “A favourite saying of mine is that ‘You don’t know what you don’t know,’ and that goes for some of the most senior and experienced chief executives across the world.”

Being transparent and honest has been fundamental to Parsons’ success. “For a leader to do their job properly, I think it’s essential to be transparent in the work that they do, both internally and externally. I’m also very honest about the fact that I don’t know the answer to everything, and own up to anything I get wrong.”

Parsons believes it is hugely important to have a large support network and online community when you’re in a high-profile job. “There are still lots of leaders who don’t use social media, but it’s such a powerful tool. It’s where your customers are and if you’re asking your team to promote your business on Twitter, you, as a leader, should do the same.”

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Now, in 2019, most leaders live on that horizon and have to rapidly adapt to new situations on an almost daily basis.”

Leading in a VUCA world

One of the key changes in leadership theory that has developed in recent years, says Duff, is the idea that leadership is an attitude rather than a set of achievements. “Not so long ago, businesses relied on competency frameworks to assess or define their leadership, but now they use models of leadership potential. Instead of looking at someone’s capacity for strategic thinking, we now look at how the leader deals with complex information, how curious they are when facing new situations, and how they make decisions despite uncertainty.”

According to Duff, inclusive leadership is among the most popular ‘new’ leadership models. “This looks at the way leaders can significantly enhance the levels of inclusion within their teams, focusing on the way they make decisions, create a secure environment and build collaboration,” he notes. The model is based on the premise that people are not inherently inclusive and even the most self-aware leader can be subconsciously influenced by his or her own biases.

Another new idea is that of the ‘humble’ leader, who prizes humility over hubris. Hogan Assessments, which designs workplace personality tests, has recently launched a new test in the US to measure potential leaders’ humility. Dr Ryne Sherman, chief science officer at Hogan Assessments, has said: “Most of the thinking suggests leaders should be charismatic, attention-seeking and persuasive. Yet such leaders tend to ruin their companies because they take on more than they can handle, are overconfident and don’t listen to feedback.”

Empathy and agility

Professor Cary Cooper was on the committee for the *Management 2020* parliamentary commission on the future of leadership. He says that issues are arising because we have underestimated the importance of empathy. “The biggest problem with today’s leaders is that they don’t have enough empathy or emotional intelligence,” he notes. “They’ve got to where they are because they have been ruthless and focused on climbing the career ladder, not because they are good managers. From an empathy point of view, they are not fit for purpose.”

So can a leader be trained to become empathetic?

Yes, says Cooper. “I’d say around 20% of people are born with empathy, 50-60% can be trained in empathy and around 20% are unable to learn.”



© REINVENTING YOURSELF AS A LEADER

Adrian Moorhouse (left), a former Olympic swimmer and co-founder of Lane4 management consultancy, says good leadership is a continual reinvention process, even though many of the basics remain the same throughout. “Typically, leaders will transition through five main types of roles as they progress. These are individual, contributor, team leader, leader of leaders and strategic leader,” he notes.

Adaptability, resilience and the ability to focus on the bigger picture are all essential to the reinvention process, Moorhouse argues. “Leaders need to identify with their new or future role and shift their beliefs about what effective performance looks like in that role. The problems start when leaders have poor self-awareness and rely too much on their past strengths.”

Stuart Duff, partner at business psychology firm Pearn Kandola, says that having the ability to reinvent yourself is one of the most important criteria

for leadership success. “Leaders need to have the motivation and desire to change, and not continue to operate as they always have,” he notes. “And, of course, they need to have the actual capacity to change their behaviours as a leader, which means testing new ways of working. It also means taking risks, which requires a resilient and open mindset.”

Tim Grinsdale, a former manager at an investment bank, now owns e-commerce company TOAD Diaries. He says that a business leader should never stop learning. “When I set up my own business in my late 50s, I realised very quickly that the buck stopped with me and that I had to find a fortitude I didn’t know I possessed. I believe the basics of leadership will never change – setting direction, communicating, encouraging, listening, being decisive and overcoming challenges – but the manner in which these skills are played out varies with every new scenario.”

Dr Simon Hayward, author of *The Agile Leader* and chief executive of Cirrus leadership consultancy, says empathy is key to being an agile leader. “Agile leaders are, as their name suggests, socially adept and able to engage and connect with a wide group of people,” he notes. “Empathy is critical to building trust, and agile leaders trust others, empowering them to do a great job and to collaborate with people across diverse areas,” he says. “Rather than reinvention, they encourage experimentation and learning by creating a safe environment in which to make mistakes.”

Adrian Moorhouse, managing director of Lane4 consultancy, says some of the leadership models gaining popularity today are really old ones that have simply been reframed. “Collaborative leadership, altrocentric leadership and boundary-spanning leadership, for example, all address the need to lead collaboratively – a concept that has been around for several decades.”

Part-time leadership

Collaborative, or shared, leadership has become significantly more mainstream in recent years, reflecting the continued rise of part-time employment. Timewise, which places senior-level people in part-time roles, estimates that 849,000 UK employees are now working part-time for a salary of £40,000-plus. Insurer Aviva, professional services firm EY and oil giant Shell all have leaders in part-time or job-share roles.

Emma Perfect, part-time chief executive at chemical engineering firm LUX Assure and a member of Vistage mentoring consultancy, says that doing a senior-level job on a part-time basis

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does present some issues. “I work 3.5 days a week, but, to be realistic, it is more like four days. In fact, all my senior management team work part-time,” she says. “There are challenges, such as continuity, but we try to ensure there is a member of the management team in the office every day of the week. That means there’s always someone on hand to discuss a challenge or sign a purchase order.”

Perfect joined the company on a full-time basis, then requested to work part-time after her first child was born. “I have built-in flexibility for my role, which is invaluable given the complex logistics of working and having young children,” she says.

Perfect has other friends and former colleagues in senior-level roles, who have not been granted the same sort of flexibility. She does not believe it’s a gender issue, though. “I’ve never felt I’ve missed out on opportunities as a woman in a male-dominated industry.”

But Merle Hall, chief executive of Kinneir Dufort, and one of the few women to lead a product design company in the UK, begs to differ. She says being a female leader still poses significant challenges: “When I was working on a management buy-out in 2016, the only women I met were the ones bringing in the tea and coffee.”

It is clear we still have a long way to go if we are to comprehensively overturn long-held assumptions about leadership. Nevertheless, the existence of a wide range of leadership models – and the momentum behind leaders with so-called ‘soft skills’, such as empathy, humility and emotional intelligence – has to be seen as progress. **E**

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