

## Journey of leadership in the workplace

### Introduction: What are the next milestones?

For well over 100 years the workplace and environment in which we work have been constantly evolving, along with the skills and approaches that are required of managers and leaders of organisations. Among the perceived changes in social norms within society, there is an expectation of individual interaction with work. It is reasonable to conclude that an organisation's work environment has a big influence on the skills required of its managers and leaders.

It is increasingly well recognised in workplaces in every sector and industry that agile working is the current, or soon to be current, working practice for most organisations. The reasons for this may be to:

- attract talent
- offer flexibility to staff
- reduce office running costs by decreasing the footprint on property
- take advantage of technological advances.

As a professional coach I note from experience that managers sometimes struggle to effectively manage their teams and performance in an agile work environment — how should they manage and lead their teams, when no-one is office based? Among the possible support interventions designed to help organisations and leaders deal with this are 1:1 coaching, leadership training and facilitated problem-solving.

From such sessions it soon becomes clear that the skills required for leaders operating in these more complex environments are centred around communication, influencing and leadership.

Beyond today's challenges, the next question is what will leadership look like beyond the "now" and how will we need to lead in the future? First, we need to understand what the workplace is going to be like in the future. Infrastructure and support services company AECOM has done extensive research to help define what the workplace will be like in 10 years. It has come to the conclusion that the typical workplace will incorporate the principles of a retail environment, and staff and managers alike will be consumers of the workplace. The workplace will be user-centric and employees will interact with the organisation on this basis.

Bearing that in mind, and given the current challenges facing leaders in implementing an agile working environment, what will that mean for leaders in the future? What skills will they need in order to manage and lead people in a consumer workplace? Will the skills required change or will they just evolve — for example, will leaders still need to influence but within a greater sphere of influence? And, if this is the case, then how will leaders expand their circle of influence in an environment where employees only interact with one another without face-to-face contact with managers; when both managers and employees need to get something from the workplace — what does that actually mean? How will we create the desire to interact? What will that mean for the social element of work? What form will it take? What impact will this have on work-life balance? Will work and leisure merge to become one, when we work throughout the day and night, albeit intermittently, ie as and when we need to, rather than being dictated by the clock? Will the balance between family life and work become just another aspect of "work" where we take a much more holistic approach to how we interact in order to "get the job done"?

### What has happened so far?

In order to start answering these questions, perhaps it is best to look back into history to identify any potential lessons that can be learned. For clarity, the workplace is being defined in this article as the type of environment that is indicative of the time period under discussion — as illustrated in Table 1.

From 1900–1920 the factory boom that occurred across the western hemisphere catapulted a transition from agriculture to industry. With this transition came a role demarcation between manager and employees, together with a set of leadership skills that defined the relationship.

Leadership skill definitions were based on the trait approach, meaning a person’s personality or social conditions determined who became a leader or manager and who was a worker. During this period staff were required to work as groups, not as individuals, which had an impact on how managers needed to lead. The approach to motivating or engaging people in work was based on incentives that were geared towards making staff work harder to increase efficiency and production in the factories.

From 1940 to 1980 the contingency and situational leadership theories emerged, and were applied particularly in the office workspace that dominated the post-war years. The nature of office work created a shift in the skills required, and the employment relationship started to shift away from focusing on workers as groups to a more individual stance recognising the differing needs of individual staff. Theories such as Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs assumed that employee engagement would be determined by how many of an individual’s needs were met.

Between 1980 and 2000 the open plan office came to the fore, triggering a new leadership emphasis that centred round transforming employee attitudes to increase commitment by inspiring loyalty and enthusiasm. To lead and engage a workforce in an open and impersonal environment requires a level of inspiration and ability to influence. Just adapting to personalities and work situations is not enough — to lead and engage people with work requires a psychological contract.

**Table 1: Relationship between workplace and leadership**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Workplace</b>	<b>Leadership skills</b>	<b>Motivation and engagement</b>
Pre-1900–1920	Factory	Trait approach	Scientific management
<b>1940–1980</b>	Plural and cubicle office	Contingency and situational	Hierarchy of Needs
<b>1980–2000</b>	Open planning	Transformational	Psychological contract
<b>2000–2018</b>	Agile workspace	Emotional intelligence	Work–life balance
<b>2000–beyond</b>	Consumer centric	Holistic	?

In today’s age of the agile workspace we are seeing another transition in leadership that centres around interpersonal, conceptual and administrative skills. Emotional intelligence is at the forefront and how leaders perceive, plan, organise and solve problems, at the same time as helping employees create a work–life balance, is key to motivating and engaging employees.

A leader in a financial institution recently stated: “The most important skill is obtaining an understanding of the different qualities that people possess and how you need to react differently for people with different styles and adapt accordingly.”

## What is next?

Extensive research has been conducted into the changing nature of the workplace. It is clear from this that, going forward, the workspace will be agile, with more and more people working in a variety of different places — at home, in the coffee shop, the airport lounge, etc. This has already started to happen and this trend is expected to increase as we move forward. According to Hilary Jeffery at AECOM and the research her team has conducted, the workplace will shift “from being the centre of productivity to being a core resource and corporate community centre” (AECOM 2014:15). Boundaries between work and the rest of our lives will be further blurred due to new technology, pace of change and our interaction with the workspace. The workspace will become a consumer environment in which workers and managers alike will come to meet colleagues and friends, eat and relax, as well as work, alone — much like a city.

So what does this mean for leadership and the skills that managers need to have in order to lead their teams? One thought is that if leadership skills are to continue to match the requirements of

the workplace (much as it has in the past) a more holistic style and skill-set will need to be incorporated into the mix. So, instead of just using emotional intelligence or transitional or situational skills to lead and manage people, a whole system approach may be required, much like taking an organisational development perspective of a company, where a holistic and planned approach is used to manage the organisation. This incorporates different elements such as the task, structure, people and technology and environment, with the aim of generating improvement. So leadership styles will perhaps shift to being more employee-focused, empowering staff to make decisions and have control over what they do. This may entail taking account of the different elements of a person in work — such as task, family, social and location — as a way of helping people to generate improvement not only in work but also in their life through work-related activities. What would be involved in developing such an approach?

If we look at interaction within the workplace, we can find similarities to what happens in a city environment. There are established zones created which determine the type of activity carried out in that space, ie residential, entertainment, recreational or business. There is also a set of laws that individuals must follow and, if they do not, there are consequences that are reported and shared with the wider community, depending on the severity of the crime. Alongside acting within laws and regulations, trust and respect are the behavioural norms by which most individuals interact within the social context of the city.

Applying the city analogy to the workplace, perhaps the role of a leader is to ensure the rules are followed within the varying spaces provided throughout a social context. Then the question becomes how does a leader do this? First of all, trust needs to be established. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) conducted some research in 2012 that outlined the requirements needed to build trust and called it the Pillars of Trust. It comprised:

- the ability to be perceived as leading
- benevolence towards others
- integrity
- predictability.

So what does this mean with regard to the types of behaviours a leader will need to demonstrate in order to manage people in the environment of the future? Being perceived by others as having an ability to do something means that the leader tends to inspire a degree of confidence. The capability and technical understanding required of leaders can be demonstrated through emotional intelligence, especially demonstrating a level of care and concern for staff. Enforcing the rules consistently and equally across all staff demonstrates fairness. So too does encouraging knowledge- sharing and involving people in the process of decision-making.

So, in the future, leaders will need to demonstrate behaviours such as confidence and emotional intelligence, as well as analytical, evaluation and communication skills. These leadership behaviours should be underpinned by values, defined in the social context of the organisation, much like a city. These values should form a key element of the organisational culture and identity that leaders are trying to create. For example, during the London Olympics 2012, the media made much of the fact that London's diversity is a key strength and reflects the city's culture and identity; the value of a city is reflected in its diversity, which defines the city's culture and identity. As a result, leaders of the city are encouraged to articulate to visitors and citizens alike how deep and real its diversity is. An example of this may be found in the implementation of the Equalities Act 2010, which lays out several laws and constructs that the city is obliged to follow, such as building disability access into new and renovated train stations.

In the organisational context, certain constraints can be used to good effect. For instance Morice Mendoza reported that at Netflix, generating high performance is thought to be due to the embedding of performance-related behaviours within the culture. Performance management is about engaging leaders and staff in conversations as an "organic part of their work" (Mendoza 2014:24). Therefore it is reasonable to say that future leadership will be about taking a holistic approach to management that incorporates the whole person regarding staff and team and to help meet the needs of the business. This throws a different emphasis on the skills that will be required for leaders and managers in a more consumer-led workplace, to include:

- influencing
- emotional intelligence
- confidence

- analytical skills
- communication
- technical competence
- benevolence of others
- integrity
- consistency in approach
- flexibility
- adaptability

Leaders will need to be able to redefine and ensure that boundaries and rules are established throughout the social context. They will need to have a high level of emotional intelligence to demonstrate benevolence towards others, the intellectual capability to get the job done, and the ability to communicate messages consistently and frequently so that staff are fully aware of what is expected of them, including the requirement to interact with, and be an active member of, the organisation in a consumer-like construct.

## Conclusion

Exploring how leadership has evolved throughout the history of the workplace helps us to identify what is required of leaders now. By identifying the type of workplace it is possible to understand the foundations of skills that will be required of leaders in the future. This includes the ability to identify how best to engage and motivate employees within the workplace.

I have argued in this article that we can confidently anticipate that employees will be motivated by methods that involve the whole person, not just one aspect of them as people. Organisations will therefore need to consider how they will recruit and retain their workforce in the future and give thought to how to ensure that policy, processes, working practices, environment and social context dovetail to create a sustainable context for high performance.

## References

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