Engagement  Retention  Innovation  Performance

Leadership tools
Leadership success through strengths
Top tips for leadership success through strengths

There are lots of different approaches to leadership, many of which are highly prescriptive about the type of qualities and behaviours you need to be an effective leader. For example, so-called “trait-based approaches” talk about the importance of qualities like charisma, persuasiveness and courage in determining leadership success.

However, recent research shows that successful leaders have very different personalities and qualities that they draw on in achieving their results. What they do have in common though, is a true understanding of and ability to leverage their Leadership Edge (their unique strengths, abilities and skills) to influence and inspire others to achieve extraordinary results.

Effective leadership is also about Positive Stretch – stretching yourself and your team to push the boundaries and achieve in the upper range of your collective strengths and capabilities. This is particularly relevant in today’s uncertain and competitive environment and markets, where organizations (private, public and voluntary) are all being challenged to do more with less, to work smarter and optimize the discretionary effort, ideas and morale of their workforce.

Read on for tips that will help you make the most of your own and your stakeholders’ strengths, maximizing contribution, positive energy and value for the organization.

Choose a positive mindset

Leaders are faced with challenging situations and opportunities everyday. Choosing how one responds to these situations are “moments of truth” for leaders, and will determine their effectiveness and impact on individuals, teams and the organization.

Leaders generally find themselves on one of two divergent paths in terms of their assumptions and beliefs which influence how to go about their leadership role and interact with others (see diagram, below). Rather than being on one path for the duration of their career, they spend time alternating between the two paths, depending on situations which confront them and how they subjectively interpret these situations. However, most have a preferred way of thinking which shapes the way they go about their role.

continued over...
Find and optimize your “Leadership Edge”
To be authentic and credible, leaders need to develop good self-awareness and make the most of who they are at their best. We refer to this as finding your Leadership Edge or unique and powerful qualities that you can bring to leadership roles. Effective leaders know better than to try to be someone they are not. They are comfortable in their own ‘skins’ and don’t try too hard to emulate other leaders. They stay true to who they are and make sure they optimize their unique mix of strengths, skill and experience.

Mastering four powerful leadership habits
Identifying and leveraging one’s unique Leadership Edge is insufficient for effective leadership. Leaders need to combine the best of who they are with four leadership habits to unlock the energy and full potential of their employees and the organization. These habits can be learned by any leader through systematic development and opportunities for practise. They are:

• Shaping a clear vision for the organization
• Sparking engagement and positively stretching people beyond their zone of comfort
• Skilfully executing the strategy and goals, ensuring the organization builds agility to respond appropriately to uncertainty and changes in the operating environment
• Sustaining progress, celebrating success and ensuring continuous improvement

Choose a positive mindset continued
The first, limiting path is what we call the Path of Limitation™. Thoughts and actions are narrowed and focused on problems, issues, failures and weaknesses and independent action. Leadership is based on a negative mindset of fear, mistrust, and pessimism. This in turn fuels a culture of learned helplessness with people feeling stuck, isolated and full of self doubt and targets being missed.

The second, more productive path is what we refer to as the Path of Possibility™. Thoughts and actions are broadened and focused on strengths, successes, opportunities, solutions and building collaborative partnerships. Leadership is based on trust, hope, optimism, purpose and energy-boosting habits. This leads to a sense of powerfulness, positive energy, confidence and meaningful work life.

It is important to understand where you are at any point of time, as well as the implications of this mindset for yourself, others and the organization. This will enable you to recalibrate and change course to stay on the performance-enhancing Path of Possibility™.
Identify and reduce ‘performance risks’

In addition to mastering these leadership habits, leaders cannot ignore ‘performance risks’ which can undermine their performance if left unchecked. These include limiting weaknesses, overdone strengths (or strengths that are overused or used in the wrong way and cause unintended negative outcomes) and sources of interference. The latter can be either internal (i.e. psychological blockers frustrating peak performance, such as self-limiting beliefs and poor self-confidence), or external such as an incompatible corporate culture or lack of sufficient resources. We advocate three strategies for dealing with such risks: using the leader’s own strengths to compensate for risk areas, bringing in others to complement the leader in weaker areas and being intentional or deliberate in building new productive habits to mitigate areas of risk and prevent failure.

Challenge people to give their best

The best leaders know there is no “one size fits all” approach for getting the best from others. They understand their employees’ strengths and create an engaging and challenging environment that allows employees to use and stretch their strengths. Leaders who regularly challenge their people to move outside their comfort zone and use their strengths in new and different ways can expect exceptional performance and engagement.

Invest in peak performing teams

Research shows that the most cohesive and successful leadership teams possess and call into play a diverse and complementary range of strengths across four main Strengthscope® areas: emotional, relational, thinking and execution. Help the team understand the implications of its strengths profile using an assessment such as StrengthscopeTeam™ as well as the extent to which it demonstrates productive team habits to translate team members’ strengths and efforts into achievement, engagement and innovation.

Cast a positive shadow everyday

Through their day to day actions, leaders influence their stakeholders and the organization in different ways. Their influence can be small, moderate or powerful. It can also be positive or negative in terms of its impact on productivity, morale and well-being. In other words, leaders can cast a strong and positive shadow on others, ensuring they bring about positive change and sustained performance improvement over time. In order to build a positive, energized culture that promotes excellence, leaders need to show the way. They should be mindful and intentional about identifying, valuing and building on others’ strengths and successes. This will encourage others to find their true strengths and put them into practice.