

A fresh lens on leaders' development

The 2016 State Services Commission's Leadership Insight survey revealed 44% of leaders did not know how to influence, inspire or motivate others. While there has been significant investment in leadership development, these results imply have leaders been let down. By begin taught concepts, information, skills, tools and techniques, they have looked outside of themselves for their professional development. Leaders have been encouraged to think there is a magic answer to their capacity to influence and inspire others with their presence, and someone else has the answer.

The secret is that leaders already have all they need to develop. Leaders can look into their own lives and experience to learn. This is their leadership material.

Successful leaders use their experience, relationships, insights, foresight and intuition alongside knowledge and information. Inspiring leaders know how to emotionally connect with others. They have genuine relationships and are authentic in their responses. They don't use skills, tools and techniques to have good relationships. They balance their personal capacities with their organisation context.



Figure 1: Relationship and behavioural learning is holistic

How have we got to this position?

Leadership Development has been built on a myth

That myth that successful leaders are rational has taken leadership development down the wrong path. This long-held belief is simply not true. What is true is most leaders are capable of being rational but it is not the be-all or end-all. Rationality is only part of the picture. If rational decisions worked, we would have solved the enduring world problems of poverty, violence, and sustainable living long ago. And women would be at least half of all executives.

People like the idea of a rational leader. The assumption that rationality is better than any

other way of interacting both devalues leaders' personal experiences, and many of their attributes. Why on earth would we do that? Rational leaders value thinking, reasoning and facts over all else. They believe feelings are soft and fluffy—immaterial at best and irritating at worst. By championing rational leaders, we fail to acknowledge that leaders are people, and leaders need people to get things done. Getting things done requires trust, collaboration, purposeful emotional connections among leaders and those they lead.

Expanding their people capacities through learning concepts and techniques doesn't work. It's the wrong approach. Communicating, inspiring people, working through others, navigating drivers, and developing relationships can only be learned in groups. What does work is leaders learning with peers through role-plays and live scenarios, in their here-and-now interactions, with structured debriefs. Leaders learn from how others experience them, they rarely learn in intellectual isolation. The central premise here is that leaders look to their own lives and relationships for their leadership material rather than rely on external models, frameworks, and sources.

How we develop leaders needs to change. Taking into account how leaders learn and that trust, changing behaviours and developing relationships can be illogical, irrational, emotional and at times awkward. You will know this from your own lives if you have had difficult relationships.

By misreading how leaders learn, we have shortchanged them. Traditional concepts and practices of learning have expanded and include a third and essential level of learning, the primary level. It is this primary level of learning, personal learning and this is central to developing leaders.

There are three levels of learning: tertiary, secondary and primary,

- **Knowing** is tertiary and related to learning information about the world, ideas, and life. Our brains accept information and use it to record, recall, and think. Actively using our memories and applying information enables us to be subject matter experts. Information and knowledge is best taught through lectures, discussions, reading, podcasts, videos, and reflection. Each of these learning methods focuses on the learner as recipient. Using our memory, thinking, and intelligence, we thrive in evidenced-based environments. This is the territory of rational thinking.
- **Doing** is secondary and is focused on being able to do things; skills, use tools and, techniques. Here, the brain's nervous system activates muscles in the body. Practice embeds patterns of movement and ways of doing things. Feedback loops indicate our level of skill. Skills, tools, and techniques are best learned through practice, discussion, demonstrations, simulations, on-the-job learning, critical reflection, and interactive dramatic methods. Learners interact with specialist teachers, coaches, and mentors.

By contextually applying knowledge and information, we develop our professional identities as doctors, marketers, IT specialists, business analysts, and managers. Our capacity to explore, research, and judiciously apply our skills comes to the fore. Secondary learning applies to developing and implementing strategy, managing

performance, selling, overseeing procurement, reporting results, and managing stakeholder relationships.

- **Being** is the primary level of learning and is related to who you are. This third level is where behavioral leadership development resides.

In primary learning our neurobiological, psychological and physiological systems are activated. Physical movement, spatial awareness, and psycho-emotional responses play their part. Primary learning is illogical, irrational, and emotional—and deeply relevant for today's world. Primary learning enables leaders to respond contextually and integrate their technical acumen with their vision, insights, experience, and intuition. This capacity enables leaders to navigate the complex and invisible mix of forces coming their way and respond relevantly.

If you have ever had an important relationship end, or a friend, partner or family member reject you, this is the territory of primary learning. Similarly, being chosen as a partner, or for a sought after work role. Our feelings (betrayal, hurt, loss, or acceptance) together with our thinking and our actions are involved. No amount of skills, tools and techniques assist in coming to terms with this loss or gain. The change in 'distance' in relationships can be both painful and exhilarating sources of feeling. Processes that do assist with experiences of personal loss and gain, are reflection, insight, intuition, experience, vulnerable conversations, asking for help, courage, trust, and developing our abilities for self-acceptance and self-development.

Primary learning is holistic, enhances our social capacities and occurs best in peer groups. Primary learning accesses our intuition, experience, vision, and curiosity to integrate thinking, feeling, and action. Applying insights, seeing things through others eyes, having meaningful conversations, developing trusted relationships rapidly, acting on what is important, and responding relevantly are the results of behavioral learning. Learners work as peers with trusted friends, colleagues, teachers, coaches, and mentors.

All three levels of learning are relevant to our functioning as effective leaders in the world. The implications of this is that leadership development includes personal development; our abilities to be with people as our genuine selves.

In addition to trusted peers two other factors in successful leadership development. One is a boss, not necessarily in a formal structural relationship, who has the leader's best interests at heart. This boss expects more of this leader than they would of themselves. These bosses are a stable yet sometimes distant force in the leader's life. Secondly, the leader sets goals, they know the outcomes they want, and they know what success looks like and can

measure that easily. This triad is core to developing successful influential relational leaders.



Figure 2: The essential triad in developing inspiring leaders

Imagine what New Zealand would offer if all leaders were able to influence, inspire and motivate others to produce great results.

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