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**35
MORE
THOUGHTS
FOR NEW AND
ASPIRING
LEADERS**

 **Stepthinking**
Common Sense Consultancy

35 MORE THOUGHTS FOR NEW AND ASPIRING LEADERS

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9. People take their lead from their leaders

When you are a leader with teams of people looking to you for direction and guidance, it is important to understand the influence you have on their behaviour and attitudes. Your actions, words, and your demeanour can set the tone for the entire team. This concept is encapsulated in the idea that "people take their lead from their leaders."

As a leader, you are a role model, and your team will naturally look to you for cues on how to conduct themselves in various situations.

This concept relates to how your outward demeanour and behaviours impact on your team. When you are enthusiastic and committed, with a positive attitude, your team is likely to exhibit the same characteristics.

On the other hand, if your demeanour is the opposite, downbeat, not appearing to care, and showing a negative outward persona, then your teams are more likely to feel that it is acceptable behaviour and do it themselves.

Culture comes from the top.

How you approach problems and setbacks can affect your team's behaviour. If you show resilience and have a problem-solving mindset, you encourage your team to take a similar stance. If you don't behave like that, then your job becomes immediately insanely more difficult because you're starting from a negative place and will always be fighting negativity.

The way you communicate is another area where your approach can permeate the behaviours of the whole team. You should aim to be clear, concise, honest and respectful in your communications, whatever the medium. This extends to how you listen to people as well. Active listening shows that you care about what your teams have to say and that boosts morale and engagement.

By keeping lines of communication open, you will create an environment where your team members are comfortable to share their thoughts and



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ideas, challenge yours and those of their teammates, and that all leads to better answers and more profitable outcomes.

Your integrity is under constant scrutiny as a leader. Your behaviour must be impeccable, because if it isn't then the trust your teams put in you will be compromised. You must model the behaviours you want from your teams. If you are fair, honest and demonstrate accountability, you will get the same back from your team. Any deviation from the high standards you expect from your team will erode your credibility and undermine their trust in you.

Being a leader is stressful, so be aware of your "stress behaviours". Everyone behaves differently when they are under pressure, and it is often used as an excuse for bad behaviour. "I'm really sorry, I was a bit stressed", is something you might hear people say, but wherever possible you should look to minimise the differences in your behaviour when you are stressed compared to when you are at rest. Consistency is important as a leader, so your teams know where they stand regardless of the situation. Remaining calm, measured and reasonable in the face of an issue will be valued by your teams and will result in a better solution, more quickly. Panic never improved a situation.

This consistency in leadership is a theme I explored in "35 Thoughts for New and Aspiring Leaders". I said that when a leader is having a good day, they should strive for their team to have a good day, and when they're having a bad day, they should strive for their teams to have a good day!

Remember that leadership is not just about setting an example but also about being approachable and supportive. Your team should feel that they can come to you with issues and that you will support them. This approachability fosters trust and loyalty, making it easier for your team to align with your vision and direction.

In leadership, you have significant influence on how your team members behave, their attitudes and ultimately, their performance. Your leadership will set the tone, and people will follow, so acting with integrity and accountability will inspire your team to do the same and reach their full potential.



14. Sometimes you need the hierarchy

When I first started work, in the early 1990s, the business I was in had a very strict and deep hierarchy. There was me in my graduate entry level role, and there were many, many layers of hierarchy before we got to the IT Director, a mythical beast in a wood panelled office, who I think I spoke to 3 times in as many years. Above him in the corporate structure of this large company there were a bunch of other layers until you got to the Chief Executive who I never actually saw in the flesh, let alone had a conversation with.

Today is very different. Many businesses claim to have a flat structure, and it is certainly true that in most businesses the hierarchy is not as tall as the one I describe above.

I was once told not to be afraid of the hierarchy, and that I could give any opinion I wanted if it was well-intentioned and delivered the right way.

I still subscribe to that bit of wisdom today, and I encourage my teams to be open and challenging with me, but in the right tone of voice and in the spirit of progressing and not point-scoring.

All of that said, there are still times when the hierarchy is important and useful.

It is useful for escalations. If your teams are struggling to get a problem solved, or a response from a supplier. Or any other situation where your seniority, or that of your management team, needs to be leveraged to get some information or outcome for your teams to progress.

The hierarchy is necessary to break a deadlock. When you have stakeholders or team members with competing priorities, or when you have technical team members disagreeing on a course of action to implement a solution or solve a problem, then an accountable person a step up in the hierarchy can intervene, hear the case for each



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approach or each priority, and take accountability for a decision that not everyone will like, but which they are authorised to make.

The hierarchy is also needed for the mechanics of most teams and their processes. Performance appraisals, if you do them, supervision and support. Some of those things are best handled by someone a little bit more experienced than the individual is.

Finally, the hierarchy is important to show people where their career progression might come from. That can be more difficult in flat structures where the only differentiation between a large body of people is salary.



16. It's OK not to have all the answers (in fact it's better if you don't!)

I've had lots of conversations with new and aspiring leaders over the years, many of whom share the same anxiety. The fear of no longer being able to stay close to everything that is going on within their organisation. This is one of the hardest things to get comfortable with when you move into a leadership role.

When you move up into leadership, your remit almost always expands. Suddenly you're accountable for more people, more teams and more output. There are more moving parts for you to consider. The level of detail you would have been able to operate at in previous roles when you had a narrower remit simply isn't sustainable now.

In my first book, 35 Thoughts for New and Aspiring Leaders, I wrote about how not every vein is an artery. It's a metaphor I like to use to remind leaders that not every issue, project or decision needs your direct hands-on involvement. Nor can you know the detailed plans around every project your teams are working on. You have to learn to be selective, to decide which initiatives to stay close to and which you should step back from and leave to your teams.

A natural byproduct of stepping away from the detail of things you are ultimately accountable for is that you won't always be able to answer every question you get asked. Many new leaders are worried that they will be viewed as having lost control if they don't know everything that is going on in detail.

You don't need to have all the answers. In fact, as your remit grows, it's better if you don't. If you insist on being the person who knows everything, you will become a bottleneck slowing your teams down.

It's so much more important for you to build a team around you that collectively does have all the answers or can get to the answers quickly.

When you have strong people in your team who you know you can rely on to answer the questions you don't have the detail on, it speaks well



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of your leadership approach because it becomes clear that you are building resilience and effectiveness into your teams. By delegating to others to answer questions, you're demonstrating that the strength in your team extends beyond you. This inspires confidence from your stakeholders.

Delegation is not an abdication of accountability. You're still accountable. It is about creating a structure where responsibility can be spread across capable people across all levels in your organisation whilst retaining overall control and accountability. This is good for team member personal and professional development.

Over time, the anxiety about not knowing every detail of what is going on will ease as you gain trust and confidence in your team.

So, embrace the fact that you won't always have the answers. That's not a failure of leadership. It is the essence of leadership done well.

