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The missing shifts

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The missing shifts

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Saumya Sindhwani, Jerry Connor and Howard Thomas argue it is time to change the way we develop leaders – and tap into the power of mindset.

Every year hundreds of books are written on leadership; business schools turn out thousands of graduates; and businesses spend millions on leadership development. But are we focusing on the right things?

- What do leaders themselves really struggle with?
- What are the changes they find the hardest to make?
- And what is it that would really help them?

Probably the best perspective on this comes from managers themselves though not in a set of interview questions but instead in one-to-one coaching sessions. These are times when a manager's guard is down and we get to hear what is really on their minds. The outcomes are surprising. The issues they are grappling with are not always the focus of our business schools. The managers are emotional rather than intellectual and personal rather than theoretical.

Overwhelmingly the needs they speak of fit into two broad categories (“empathy” and “resourcefulness”) and both are fundamental “changes in mindset”. By that, we mean a change in attitude or world view. And changing mindset enables leaders to unlock changes in behaviour they have been struggling with, which in turn creates new results. It is these issues and the ability to make these two shifts that seem, in their own words, to be the most critical in helping leaders progress. This is clearly understood by the managers in our data. They are not struggling to understand the importance of these issues. But something is missing. Knowing what to do is not enough. Managers are struggling with how to change and the key is the mindset.

As a result, our data suggests 63 % of first-line leaders are struggling with the two basic mindset shifts and, perhaps more worryingly, these are still the biggest challenges when they become middle leaders.

In this article we argue that both leaders and educators should focus more time and energy on the areas leaders are really struggling with — and explicitly examine managerial mindset. Without this, we are simply not giving leaders what they need to develop.

As stated, this article draws on a revealing set of data into what managers really think. The research was done analysing Coach in a Box's unique leadership data set of one-to-one conversations between over 600 individuals and their coaches. The data set was anonymised but features employees working in multinational companies from Asia, Europe and North America. For each individual, we have looked at four anonymised coach-coachee interactions over the period of a leadership programme. In each, the coachee is talking to his or her coach about what they are struggling with and what they feel they need to change. Focusing on inter and intra-personal concerns we have identified “shifts” (changes in mindset or attitude) that the managers themselves see as being most critical. We have then analysed this data by levels. So what do leaders really say they are struggling with?

Two fundamental challenges occur again and again in the data for junior and middle managers (new challenges begin to emerge with the senior management group). The first and most common is all about finding ways to engage or influence different people. We call this the “empathy” shift. The

interesting thing is that the coaching conversations on this issue inevitably follow a similar course. In order to make the change, the coachee needs to challenge the way they are seeing the other person and the situation. To change their mindset. They need to become curious about the other individual and what makes him or her tick. They then need to adapt their response accordingly.

In conversation after conversation, we have noticed this is because leaders are not seeing others as diverse individuals with different ways of seeing the world. They have a fixed mindset about others. As a result, they are tending to use too narrow a set of approaches in dealing with the issues.

The second most common challenge we find in the data is less about other people and more about the leader themselves. We classify this as the resourcefulness shift. These are examples where leaders want help in changing their own behaviour. All these leaders have the self-awareness to have identified times when they are not at their best and know the cost of it. They know what they want to change. In fact, many of them have gone through a number of diagnostics and assessment tools. But awareness is not enough. These leaders are showing they understand the challenge but are asking for help in how to change it.

Again, all of these conversations follow a similar pattern. The coachee first learns to identify the situation and how he or she is reacting to it. Concepts such as trigger event are helpful here. They then uncover the internal dialogue that is driving their behaviour. In other words, they understand why they are reacting the way they are. They then work with the coach to challenge this self-talk and change their response.

Interestingly, in going through this kind of process we see coachees not only learning to overcome the original challenge but also repeated evidence that this gives them the confidence to change their response to other situations. In other words, they've built a new mindset that enables them to stay resourceful, learn and adapt to future stressful situations.

Moving to the next level: The openness and authenticity shifts

Our data, further suggests that as leaders mature, two new shifts become critical. We are calling these the openness and the authenticity shifts. These occur more often as leaders become more senior. There is also evidence that these shifts follow the earlier ones. In other words, in the intra-personal territory leaders seem to need to have already mastered the resourcefulness shift to need to work on the authenticity shift. Equally, in the interpersonal arena, those focusing on the openness shift seem to have already made the empathy shift in their approach to relationships. There is effectively a second level of shift in each area.

The third shift, the openness shift is seen within the data when we see leaders facing issues that require more than simply the flexibility to adapt to others described in the empathy shift. For example, dealing with difficult or controversial issues – especially between teams or functions, developing other leaders and inspiring others to show initiative or helping others change behaviour.

In all these situations the leader is searching for a way to develop a new level of openness and trust and for ways to use this to change the response others have to them or to a situation. They are less about flexibility and more about connection. A fourth shift is also apparent within the data. This appears to be a development of the resourcefulness shift. In this data, we see leaders not merely wanting to change the way they respond to a situation but looking more broadly at themselves and the way they want to be as a leader. They recognise that others do not simply follow leaders who conform to a standard definition of a leader but that leadership is something that is more personal and each leader needs to find their own way to express it.

At a practical level, this means we see them looking more deeply into their personality and its drivers and attempting deeper changes. Another word that appears frequently in the data is “presence”.

Leaders are wanting to have a greater presence in the organisation and to be more involved with their teams. For example, one leader explores how easy it is for them to neglect their team unless there is a crisis looming. They define their leadership by the activities that are required and neglect the power others experience from the leader simply “being there” for others. And to be more involved each leader needs to worry less about what they should be doing and become more comfortable in their own skin.

In his famous work on emotional intelligence, Daniel Goleman produces some remarkable statistics. For example, in professional services, he found that leaders with social skills made 110 % more profit than those without. And those with self-management (those also mastering shifts like the resourcefulness shift) a massive 390 %.

It is clear that our data support this. But it is also clear that most leaders do not need telling this. They know the importance of emotional intelligence. But they don’t know how to build it. And what they are missing is an insight into how to their change mindsets. So what does this mean? The first and most obvious lesson is that as a leader – and as a developer of leaders – emotional intelligence is paramount. The inter and intrapersonal challenges contained within the “resourcefulness”, “empathy”, “openness” and “authenticity” shifts are at the heart of the future success of leaders.

Any leadership development programme that spends less than 50% of its time on these subjects is missing the target. But the insight from our data is that just helping others become aware of the importance of these capabilities is not enough. Our data shows that leaders no longer need to be told this is important. And there are almost no examples of leaders seeking advice on what to do.

And yet the vast majority of the literature and advice we give leaders is exactly of this nature. We give them advice on what to do, which – according to our data – is not needed. What leaders need is help on how. On how to change the mindset. And this means identifying which of the four shifts is right for them and helping them make it. The how itself is also rooted in the data. The conversations associated with each shift follow four different but clear patterns. If we can replicate these we can help leaders make the shifts they need.

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