

Outstanding Leadership: Research Highlights

The highly respected Work Foundation, previously The Industrial Society, has recently explored what it is to be a good and even an outstanding leader. Here are the edited highlights of their findings.

The very short summary is that good leaders do Future - Engage - Deliver well. And outstanding leaders practise it really well!

How do you see you and colleagues are doing as leaders compared with what they found about outstanding leaders?

Overall Findings

This major research project set out to explore in depth the beliefs and practices of outstanding leaders to test and bring new dimensions to the world of leadership theory. A team of eight researchers conducted 262 in-depth meetings with leaders, their managers and their direct reports in six of the UK's most well known and enduring organisations: BAE Systems, EDF Energy, Guardian Media Group, Serco, Tesco and Unilever.

The two-year study shows that outstanding leaders combine a drive for high performance with an almost obsessive focus on people as the means of achieving this. Outstanding leaders are focused on sustainable performance, purpose and meaning, knowing that people are the only route to its achievement and that they themselves enable others through their influence on those around them.

Becoming an outstanding leader is likely to depend a great deal on maturity, self-awareness and self-development within the job. Some of the outstanding leaders featured in the research did not originally have a people-focused approach, but realised the impact they were having on people and therefore adjusted their style accordingly. They arrived at this point through experience, maturity and reflection.

What is striking is that the research has uncovered clear differences between good and outstanding leadership. There is now evidence to support a systemic, people-centred approach to high performance leadership. This is a paradigm shift for most leaders who remain focused on the numbers and has implications for all organisations seeking to improve their performance.

The report's researchers stress that the emphasis on people-centred leadership is particularly critical while the world is still experiencing tough economic conditions. They point to the widespread tendency to assume that in difficult times, people think they need powerful leaders, with a controlling, target-driven approach. Yet, evidence from the research indicates the opposite, demonstrating that this instinct can be counter-productive.

Notice the 'almost obsessive focus on people'. In your working week, how strong is your focus on getting the best from people?

In 'tough conditions', how natural is your tendency to actually increase your 'emphasis on people-centred leadership'?

Future

All leaders talked about the importance of engaging others in the vision but outstanding leaders conveyed a greater depth and higher purpose when speaking about vision, seeing it as a clarion call which affected employees' commitment and engagement. Good leaders were more likely to see vision as aligning people through a cascade of objectives.

Outstanding leaders speak about seeing the whole, about acting in systemic and

sophisticated ways to create excellence, and about focusing on capability and autonomy of people to deliver. They recognised that how they are with people hinders or helps to galvanise others behind the vision.

How well do you 'convey a greater depth and higher purpose when speaking about vision'?
How clear are you that 'how you are with people hinders or helps to galvanise others'?
What regular feedback do you seek about whether you do 'galvanise' or not?

Engage

Outstanding leaders see people as the route to performance. They are deeply people- and relationship-centred rather than just people-oriented. They give significant amounts of time and focus to people. For good leaders, people are one group among many that need attention. For outstanding leaders, they are the only route to sustainable performance. They not only like and care about people, but have come to understand at a deep level that the capability and engagement of people is how they achieve exceptional performance.

Outstanding leaders passionately and constantly invest in their people and use the challenges presented every single day to encourage growth, learning and engagement.

Outstanding leadership depends on trusting and positive relationships that are built over time for the long-term benefit of the people and their organisation. They spend a significant amount of time talking with people to understand what motivates them and how they can support and boost enthusiasm in others. They understand the power of trust to speed up interactions, enable people to take risks, diminish arguments or disputes and underpin innovation.

To what extent would you say you are 'deeply people- and relationship-centred rather than just people-oriented'?
To what extent do you believe 'at a deep level that the engagement of people is how you achieve exceptional performance'?

Deliver

When it came to creating the right working environment, all leaders understood the need for trust, respect and honesty. But outstanding leaders understood how they combined to create the conditions for exceptional performance. They also understood the role they played in creating these conditions and were careful to be consistent even though that might mean controlling their emotions and not betraying their own fluctuating mood.

In response to failure, outstanding leaders were more likely to try to maintain and build trust, focusing on what an individual had achieved and how they could grow from the experience, whereas good leaders might unwittingly fail to connect their actions and reactions with the possible consequences.

Outstanding leadership focuses on the few key systems and processes which help provide clarity, give structure, enable feedback, allow time for discussion and enable the development of vision. They use them to achieve outcomes rather than focus on the process, and put flexibility and humanity first.

How well do you understand 'the role you play in creating conditions for exceptional performance'?
What is your natural reaction 'in response to failure'? Is it 'to maintain and build trust' and 'grow' the individual?

Teams

All leaders understood the importance of team spirit and engagement. But outstanding leaders manipulated the environment through team bonding, removed hierarchy, formed deep relationships and co-created plans rather than making a decision and simply asking people what they thought.

Outstanding leaders work through people. They understand excellent performance is reliant on people. So the need is to engage others in the endeavour. The team is then motivated by a common purpose and goal. Outstanding leaders focus on the outcome as the purpose and align people to this.

Outstanding leaders work hard on issues such as team spirit, shared decision making, collaborative working and a strong bond within and between teams. Sustainable performance comes from collective wisdom and intent, encouraging people to get involved, and giving them voice and autonomy.

In teams you are in, how much time and energy do you spend on 'team spirit and engagement' and 'forming deep relationships and co-creating plans'?
To what extent are your teams 'motivated by a common purpose and goal'? That is, to what extent are they up to something together?

For full report, go to

<http://www.theworkfoundation.com/research/publications/publicationdetail.aspx?oltemId=232&parentPageID=102&PubType=>