



# Things that matter for effective leadership



REFLECTIONS FROM 25 YEARS OF CONSULTING

David Green  
October 2022

*Beyond limits*



# Things that matter for effective leadership

REFLECTIONS FROM 25 YEARS OF CONSULTING



## DAVID GREEN

David has been a consultant and coach for over 25 years, a friend and a collaborator. He is one of Australia's most experienced and effective artisans of organizational improvement

**This short paper is designed to help leaders and managers clarify their thinking when it comes to what *really* matters in how they lead not only their immediate teams, but an entire workforce and a whole organization.**

**It arose out of countless requests to David from clients, colleagues, and coachees to clarify what they should be *really* working on.**

**David has written in a style which is somewhat personal and intended to speak directly to those seeking answers to this question.**

**David first circulated an earlier version of this paper in 2020 and an updated version is reprinted here with his permission.**

**Tim Dalmau**

## Introduction

No-one can dictate what another will believe, or what they will value, or what they will feel.

Effective leadership involves drawing people along with you in these domains, not trying to force them. It entails influencing others through relationship.

Followers decide whether they will believe in, or give their followership at a point in time to those who presume to offer leadership. For this to happen, they must have a degree of faith in those leaders, based on their personal experience and perception of them. In a large company, this still applies, even when there is distance between staff and executive.

Effective leadership invites others to take risks, such as openness, trust or innovation. Why should people invest themselves in that risk? Where is the quid pro quo? What makes it safe?

A company's executive can only create those enabling conditions if it, as a team and individually, exemplifies leadership.

If they can't create safety for each other, and real honesty, courage and support for each other, they can't create it for their people. If they don't live their values and hold each other to account for living them, their people will always know.

An executive group's actual behavior has not only a tangible effect, it also serves a symbolic function for

© Copyright 2022 Dalmau Consulting.

Any part or all of this document may be copied if it is for training or educational purposes only, not for resale or profit, provided due acknowledgment of its source is included on each page.





hundreds sometimes thousands, of their staff.

The organisational dynamics of a company - typically, such things as morale, lived values, trust, openness and honesty, respect and support, shared identity and purpose, connection and belonging, teamwork - can never be created by decree or even exhortation. Only by example and engagement.

To maintain this kind of integrity and consistency between our values and our actual real life behavior requires constant attention and application. The best way to achieve this is to continually welcome honest feedback from those around us. It doesn't have to be "true"; it just has to be honest.

People have often asked me about what it is they might develop in order to become more effective in their leadership. Following is a summary of my thoughts based on 25 years of experience about what really matters for effective leadership.

## Modelling (be the story)

The most important factor in your behavior is whether your it is seen by others as aligned with your professed values, that is, do your actions seem to be in line with your words. Beware phrases like 'people are our greatest asset', 'safety is our no. 1 priority', 'respect for a range of views is central...' - if your actions (including body language) don't align.

This relates to congruence, which applies just as much in a face-to-face situation as more remote ones. In person, most

of the people you engage with will make judgements about your trustworthiness by comparing your actions and words, your actions and actions, and your words and words<sup>1</sup>.

All of this relates of course to perceptions - not some 'objective' reality - and so it highlights the importance of collecting non-verbal feedback, and checking what messages others actually receive from you and about you (both what you say and your non-verbals).

The more you use corporate phrases and motherhood statements, the less people tend to trust you.

The point here is a critical one - if your people don't experience you as making a genuine effort to live the company values and treat others with respect, they will not genuinely commit either.

A key question is - How are you going to know how others experience you? Can you create the enabling conditions for that kind of honesty?

## Be a Team

Being a high-performing team is not easy to achieve, nor to maintain. In fact, it needs constant attention, monitoring, and investment. Trust has to be built and then diligently guarded through honest feedback and hard conversations.

1) Equally important to good modelling is consistency of response in ones words and behaviors. The quickest way to create social and psychological spaces that are unsafe is to be inconsistent. For more on this see [Psychological safety is the response you get](#) by Paul O'Neill and Tim Dalmau.





To get robust decisions which everyone honors, to hold each other accountable for doing what we say, and to detect and deal with the constant disruptions to the team - requires ongoing effort to maintain the enabling conditions in the team dynamic.

Apart from maximising its own effectiveness, it is essential that the Executive Lead Team models this effectiveness and the effort required ... if the Executive doesn't do it, no-one else can or will!

And everyone else quickly detects if that's not happening, which in turn lets everyone else off the hook in terms of taking responsibility themselves.

## Clear, Evident, Shared Values-in-Action

Every action you take, every interaction you have with staff, every decision you take, every 'quiet word' you have with someone - the significance of each one registers with staff. And part of their response is always whether it stacks up against a) the espoused values of the business, and b) your espoused values.

If there is any dissonance, staff will believe (as you do with others yourself) that the values expressed by your actions are not your 'real' ones.

As much as possible your expression of values needs to be unambiguous; the more you qualify your decisions, the more

sceptical people become.

And there is another dimension - the more congruence there is by the executive team as a whole, the more people will have trust and confidence in you and your values. This implies that members of the executive must spend real energy holding each other accountable and testing/ challenging each other, no matter how uncomfortable that is to do.

## Move Towards the Tension

This "rule of thumb" is arguably the best path towards real engagement. Whenever we turn away from another, relationship becomes impossible.

To avoid tension usually signals such emotions as arrogance, cowardice, disinterest, or self-absorption, or that we actually see the other as unimportant or not worth the effort.

We need to move towards the tension in respect of hot issues or issues we thought were "resolved", but which sometimes turn out not to be.

In person, it counts a lot too - it involves turning to face the other with an attitude of genuine interest, welcoming their view or their challenge. It involves listening to them with real attention. Engaging does not mean you will always agree with them.

"Introversion" is no excuse for turning away if you want to give leadership.



## Skilful and Attentive Engagement

'Engagement' is a much-abused word in corporate settings. 'Staff engagement', 'customer engagement', 'community engagement' are the subject of a huge number of performance assessments, and phone and online surveys.

Real engagement is usually face-to-face. This is the kind of engagement which counts under the title of 'leadership'. It involves showing genuine interest in 'the other', listening and demonstrating that you have heard them, then talking through the issue they've raised. The issue is dealt with when the other lets you know (verbally or non-verbally) that it's done.

You have to demonstrate real relationship skills, not rely on your position to 'carry the day'. Specifically, these include calibration of body language, rapport (or connection), self-management, listening, negotiating, and the smart use of questions and language generally.

## An Attitude of Being In Rather than Above the System

As a manager, it may make sense to be detached and objective, so as to make logical decisions about resources. But, as a leader, none of us can actually remove ourselves from the human system - we are integrally a part of it whether we like it or not.

It constantly impacts on us and vice-versa. We cannot not participate. The issue is how we do that?

Staff do not see executives as outside the system, rather as having a privileged place within it - which carries personal responsibilities. Everyone in the system is *in relationship*.

Organizational dynamics work to very different rules to those of resource management. Dynamics are constructed, that is, made up. No two organizations have the same dynamics. They are alive, that is, constantly in flux, open to change, always to some degree messy and uncontrollable.

Just when you think things are 'sorted', there are new surprises, new upheavals, new issues. What events mean to people can change when we least expect. People will react in constantly changing and apparently inconsistent ways.

Everything is subjective, personal and emotional and everyone in the system is part of that melting pot.

Can you make an honest and respected place for yourself in the eyes of the people who make up the system?

Are you up for constant, never-ending engagement? And can you continue to value and welcome that continuous demand while owning your own personal struggles as well?

## Storytelling

We have to use human means to do a human job. Whenever we are communicating with others, story is the most human, powerful, natural and effective way to do it.

In fact, story is the best way to do almost every piece of connection, persuasion, influence and leadership. It is therefore one of the most important leadership

competencies available to us.

Using story is central to - building trust and connection, conveying vision and values, modelling positive thinking and behavior, persuading, selling an idea, setting direction, explaining initiatives or processes, coaching, delegating, and inspiring. It works for intangibles and tangibles alike.

Executives competent in storytelling are good at working with both metaphor and story. They know how to hear useful stories in the workplace, and how to construct, craft and render compelling narratives in terms that their colleagues can relate to.

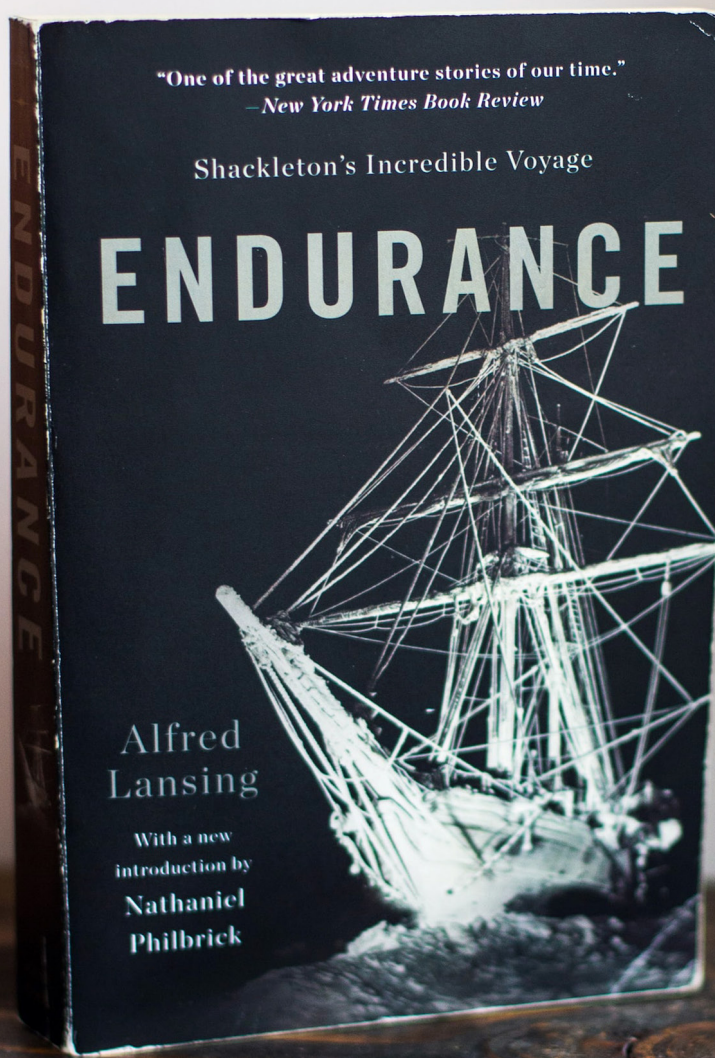
## Give and Get Feedback and Challenge

If a human system were a machine, feedback would be the oil needed to keep it in motion.

Formal feedback mechanisms - staff and customer surveys, questionnaires, 360 feedback - are in many cases of limited use when engaging with leadership issues. Research design competence and linguistic skills are mandatory yet sadly lacking in most cases. Issues are often poorly or subjectively framed, resulting in language can on occasion be too fluffy or generalised. So it makes it difficult to know the way respondents are actually constructing their experiences internally.

The data collected is sometimes poorly defined and fails to suggest what it is exactly that executives need to do





differently, let alone how. For example, high staff turnover may suggest poor leadership, but does not of itself suggest exactly how that leadership needs to change.

Good leaders invite frequent on-the-spot feedback (about ideas, decisions, initiatives, and actions) from those they lead and then they engage usefully with it. They offer honest and useful feedback to others as a mark of interest and respect. They welcome well-intentioned challenges to their ideas and actions as a sign of commitment to a better workplace and better solutions. They invite robust debate.

They collect ongoing feedback from voice and body language all the time they are working with others. If they are unsure what it means, they inquire. Interpersonally, "the feedback you need is right in front of you all the time."

## Learning Attitude

Effective executive leaders see every event at work as potentially a context for learning.

Some executives operate a "blame frame" - every time something doesn't work, they look for fault - for someone/ something to blame. In contrast, good leaders tend to approach every event as an opportunity to learn, rather than diagnose and blame.

This does not imply that everyone is actually in the 'right' job, and if a staffer is the wrong person for a role at a point in time, then that issue needs to be dealt with. However, we all make mistakes, and in fact, unless we only take up jobs

we can already do fully, we are going to make mistakes. A good leader works with their reports to continually learn from mistakes, new situations, and the unexpected.

A learning frame requires its own skills - rapport, plus detached inquiry, and the ability to 'step back' into a disassociated perspective.

## Self-Knowledge and Reflection

Every reputable model of leadership includes consideration of the importance of knowing yourself. If you are to play a useful part in the system, self-awareness is an essential element.

This includes having a knowing and accurate understanding of your own strengths and weaknesses, your motives, the triggers which tend to fire up your thoughts and behaviors, and self-respect. It represents an important part of 'emotional intelligence'.

Without continual work on self-awareness, we tend to be less mature than we might be.

We have all known senior managers whose drivers were self-satisfaction rather than the general good, or who acted immaturity; who turned every problem into a contest they had to win, or who chronically needed affirmation from others.

Executives who do not know themselves well, by virtue of their position, will impose their personal dysfunctionality on a greater number of others



Sometimes, they will be particularly susceptible to flattery and the efforts of others to 'keep them happy', which tend to come from their elevated position. This in turn creates a snowball effect of more and more disinformation.

Self-awareness is a lifelong pursuit. We expect older people to have developed more self-understanding and wisdom than young people, as a result of life experience. We can actively pursue ongoing self-awareness by inviting feedback from others, by personal exploration, and through reflection.

## Personal Qualities including Courage, Integrity, Compassion, Humility and Robustness

There are a number of personal characteristics which typify highly effective leaders, which are inseparable from their capacity to give leadership. They comprise a unique mix, which at first pass may seem contradictory, but which are in fact complementary. They all require that a leader is both self-aware and comfortable with who they are - or else that they have worked at developing aspects of themselves that they realise need more work. This might involve seeking out a coach who is quite different in temperament to themselves.

The most important attributes are indicated above. Leadership requires the courage to move towards the tension, to invite honest comment, and then deal openly with what comes out of it. We have to be constantly working towards alignment between our aspirations, values, and actual behavior.

'Compassion' literally means 'a feeling for/with' another. This is a skill which can be learned.

Organizational dynamics often work against humility - the further up the food chain someone goes, the more likely it is that those around them will give them disinformation (tell them what they think they want to hear), and the human system will stroke their egos. It takes a special senior manager (who is very self-aware) to see beyond this, and genuinely elicit honesty among their staff.

In real life, those in leadership positions can be exemplary of good leadership and still be subject to different views, challenge and passionate disagreement. Robustness, or learned optimism, is essential to good leadership, as long as it doesn't lead to dogmatism.

## Reprise

When I think back to all those who have asked me the starting question "What should I work on to be better as a leader?", these eleven foci seem to have come up time and time again. They are, if you will, leadership must-haves and yet, are also domains that are life-long tasks - you can always do better in each.

Be congruent, be the behavior you want to see in others, make sure that in your values and those of your colleagues you practice what you preach in consistent, similar ways, embrace tensions, be attentive and skilful in how you engage, be a part of the business and do not set yourself apart, embrace feedback and challenge, stay curious and self-critically reflective, and continually hone your personal virtues - these are always areas you can work on, and as you do you **will** become more effective as a leader.

**David Green**

October 2022



Beyond  
limits



**Dalmau Consulting**

Box 283 Samford Village  
Queensland 4520  
Australia

**Tel:** +61 7 3289 2133  
**Email:** [info@dalmau.com](mailto:info@dalmau.com)  
**Website:** [www.dalmau.com](http://www.dalmau.com)