

How to lead organisations through uncertainty

In uncertain times, effective leadership is needed more than ever. However, too often we fail to recognise where leadership resides – and that leads to failure, says TONY O'DRISCOLL

Abstract

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As individuals and organisations around the world struggle to make sense of a past that no longer exists and an increasingly uncertain future, we must reimagine leadership as an adaptive system that puts people at the centre and fosters a culture of aspiration, alignment, autonomy and accountability. This paper describes the characteristics of such an adaptive leadership system and presents a people-centred transformation (PCT) framework that can be used to successfully navigate the transition and make change really happen.

What's new?

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization officially declared Covid-19 a global pandemic. Over the past two years, humanity has been thrust into the liminal space that lies between our familiarity with what was and our uncertainty about what might be.

The struggle to navigate this liminality has led to a dramatic increase in what Ed Schein has termed survival anxiety. Many of us have felt like a trapeze artist hurtling through the air with no safety net below, having been forced let go of one bar to desperately reach for another. It is a very uncomfortable place to be.

Now, as Covid seems to be clearing, we suddenly find ourselves grappling with the thickening fog of war

surrounding Ukraine. The one-two punch of a global pandemic and the imminent threat of a global war has made it increasingly difficult for humanity to maintain continuity with what John Vervaeke describes as an ever-evolving horizon of intelligibility. Simply put, humanity finds itself at the brink of an existential crisis because things just don't seem to make sense to us anymore.

Throughout history, in times of profound societal confusion and delusion, leadership has emerged to light the path towards a brighter tomorrow. History and Hollywood have cemented the mythology of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey into our collective psyche. Many of us cling to the cherished belief that, in our darkest hour, a superhero will inevitably

appear to save the day. These stories have caused us to errantly assume that leadership is a noun and not a verb.

In so doing, we have unconsciously separated the leader from the system within which leadership itself is being exercised. As a result, we tend to overvalue the impact that individual leaders can have.

Key findings

The issue is that we currently find ourselves in a paradoxical situation where the need for leadership to come forward is becoming increasingly acute while the leadership we need challenges our beliefs on what it means to lead.

In essence, we have fallen prey to what Richard Hackman describes as leader attribution error, by failing to recognise

that leadership is not simply a person, position or role. Leadership emerges from the connections people make and the decisions they collectively take. And so, we must reimagine leadership as an adaptive system. This will require a paradigm shift in what we have long believed about what it means to lead.

It needs us to recognise that leadership is:

- A system, not a person
- About generating energy among others rather than exerting power over them
- About catalysing discretionary effort and not exercising control



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- About nurturing relationships, not enforcing rules
 - About cultivating ability rather than mandating responsibility
- Most importantly, we must recognise that every person in an organisation is ‘response-able’ – they have the ability to lead by catalysing the efforts of others towards the achievement of a shared aspiration.

As such, the formal leaders operating in the middle of the organisation – not those at the top – are the greatest leadership system catalysts. These centre-leaders propel the organisation forward by working from the

middle-out to inform strategic direction, motivate change, guide key work activity, and influence individual behaviour.

They achieve this by creating meaning for their people in a way that clearly connects individual aspirations to the collective goal of the organisation. They focus on the intrinsic motivational levers that compel people to contribute their discretionary effort by giving them autonomy in return for accountability.

In summary: if your people are intrinsically motivated to contribute their discretionary

effort around a shared aspiration that is meaningful to them and given the autonomy and accountability to achieve that aspiration, your organisation will thrive. If not, it is highly unlikely that your organisation will survive.

From research to reality

People are not the only entity facing an existential crisis. Since the year 2000, just over half of the names of companies on the Fortune 500 list have disappeared.

Organisations are perishing at epidemic rates because they

can't keep up with higher levels of change and compounding degrees of complexity within their ever-evolving business ecosystem. The existential threat facing organisations is clear: they must change, or they will die.

So, does your organisation have what it takes to thrive in an increasingly unpredictable environment? Are your leaders willing to change their cherished beliefs about what it means to lead? Are they willing to change their behaviours to catalyse an adaptive leadership system that enables your organisation to achieve its highest aspiration?



The people-centred transformation (PCT) framework identifies 10 elements that leadership must activate to change their beliefs and behaviours to cultivate lasting positive organisation change.

Each one can be given a rating from one to seven (one being strongly disagree and seven being strongly agree):

1 Our leaders communicate a clear, concise, consistent and compelling narrative that makes a purposeful, passionate and emotionally resonant case for change.

2 Our leaders generate respect and followership from others by personally, authentically and openly modelling the changed beliefs and behaviours required to evolve the organisation.

3 Our leaders show vulnerability, seek help, demonstrate that failure is acceptable, and consistently seek to increase the autonomy and accountability of others.

4 Our leaders bring clarity and focus by prioritising and communicating the key strategic priorities that matter most to the business.

5 Our leaders understand how to motivate discretionary effort by tapping into the aspirations of others and giving them autonomy in return for accountability.

6 Our leaders create agency by giving others the permission

to take independent actions and make changes without hierarchical approval.

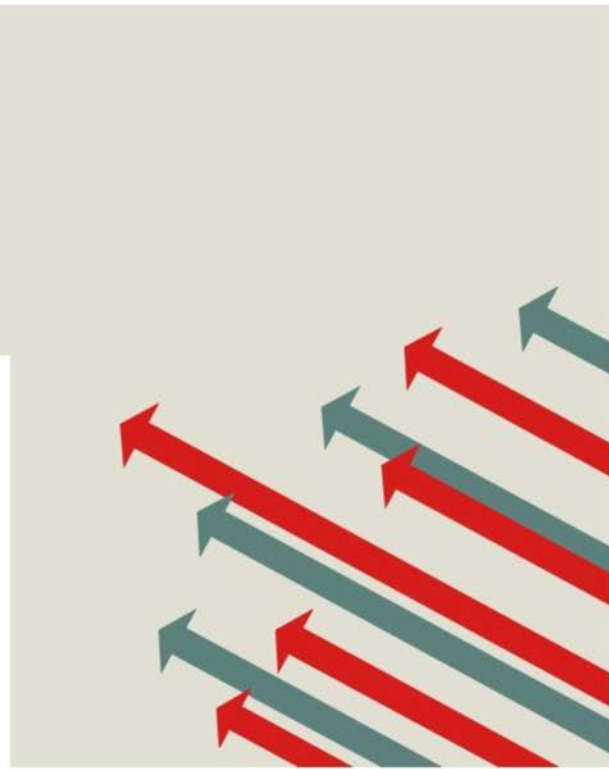
7 Our leaders only make the choices they are best equipped to make, clarify the choices others have to make and the boundaries within which to make them.

8 Our leaders create the time and space for cross-functional teams to emerge, converge, and engage around crucial strategy design and delivery interfaces.

9 Our leaders catalyse the collaborative leadership required to successfully navigate dynamic, complex, and systemic change.

10 Our leaders consciously and continuously nudge the culture in the direction of aspiration, alignment, autonomy and accountability

After giving each one a rating from one to seven you can then isolate the element or elements



About the author

Tony O'Driscoll is a professor at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business. This article is based on his most recent book, co-created with **Gary Zamchick**, *Everyday Superhero: How You Can Inspire Everyone and Create Real Change at Work* (Penguin Business), published on 31 March 2022.

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