

# Technical Briefing

CIMA

DEVELOPING AND PROMOTING STRATEGY

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## Leadership Skills – An Overview

### IN THIS BRIEFING...

#### Part 1

Leadership:  
definition and traits

#### Part 2

A brief guide to leader-  
ship theories and models

#### Part 3

Leaders v. managers?

#### Part 4

Business leadership in  
the new economy

#### Part 5

Barriers to  
successful leadership

#### Part 6

Leadership training

#### Part 7

References for further  
reading and bibliography

**A** survey conducted by CIMA as part of Global Business Management Week 2000 among business leaders from Asia, the United States, the Middle East, the UK, France and Germany showed that leadership (rated against nine other qualities) as the most important skill for business leaders of the future. Finding and retaining quality people was overwhelmingly chosen as the most important factor for success of businesses worldwide. The ability to achieve this and to maximise the potential of human capital depends greatly on visionary leaders who have a portfolio of skills, combining 'softer skills' such as vision and communication with more technical capabilities and know-how. In a world of great uncertainty and great opportunity, leadership is important for the success of your organisation and the fulfilment of the people working in it.

**E**xtensive research conducted by The Industrial Society (an organisation campaigning to improve working life) in 1996 on what individuals and teams expect to see in their leaders, led it to review its beliefs on the nature of leadership. The Society's five core beliefs on leadership are:

1. People in an organisation need to believe that they can give it a competitive edge by creating an environment where people can continually contribute to an organisation's success.
2. The ability to be regarded as a leader exists at all levels and is not restricted to those in a management role.
3. What a person says and does (which is influenced by their beliefs) enables others to perceive that person as a leader and choose to follow.
4. Leadership behaviours can be developed and beliefs can be changed over time.
5. Many leadership behaviours have failed to harness the full potential of people at work and have resulted in compliance rather than commitment.

**T**his briefing looks at the nature of leadership in the 21st century as well as offering practical guidance on improving your leadership skills by looking at both what leaders do and how they do it. Some feel that leadership is an art and those good at it will see it as common sense. However, models and insights into leadership and skills profiles can be useful tools to aid self-development and to achieve better results. This is not to say that there is one ideal model of leadership but rather to improve your approach in your job.

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## Part 1 – Leadership: definition and traits

A common definition of leadership states that it is ‘the process through which leaders influence the attitudes, behaviours and values of others’ (Hagen et al, 1998). As with many other ‘soft’ issues, the definition is somewhat vague in that it does not address the question of how leaders actually conduct the process of influencing. Organisational structure, personalities of leaders and followers, the context in which they operate and so on, all play a part in determining the function and style of leadership. Such a great number of variables make constructing a profile of a good leader impossible. However – again as with many soft management issues – the exact definition is less important than the fundamental principles behind the concept. Although there is no one definitive model, there is now something of a broad consensus about the basic qualities a leader should possess.

### Vision

Vision is what most people choose as the defining characteristic of great leaders, whether in business or otherwise. They seem to have unfaltering – but not inflexible – belief about where the company is heading and what needs to be accomplished to get there. They are capable of seeing the ‘big picture’ before anyone else. This certainty and focus can provide stability throughout the organisation.

Vision needs to be conveyed all the way through the company, so that even a post-room worker feels that he or she is making a contribution. This is achieved not by simply formalising it in rules and procedures but by having inspirational people who can communicate the message clearly and directly.

### Trust and communication

Crucially, leaders are also active listeners who can see another’s point of view. This empathy allows them to forge trust between themselves and their followers, which forms the foundations of their relationship. Without such firm grounding, the task of leadership would be impossible – you cannot take people with you if they don’t trust you. Research clearly shows that perceptions of a person’s overall effectiveness as a leader are correlated with people’s trust (Fairholm ed, 2000). Trust needs continuous nourishment and cannot be forced or commanded.

### Passion and motivation

Leaders bring passion into work. Their pursuit of goals and objectives is imbued with optimism. There is an alarming statistic which claims that only 16 per cent of employees say they used more than half of their talents at work. Because of poor leadership, people do not apply themselves, probably because they don’t see their work

as being worthwhile, significant or capable of making any real difference in the world. Exceptional leaders make us want to work both harder and smarter. Because they are passionate and infuse everything they do with a sense of purpose, making it a part of a greater goal, we are eager to participate. They make us see how our individual effort adds value to our company’s work. Leaders empower staff at all levels of the organisation to be the leaders themselves. In doing so, they expect and tolerate mistakes but they also ensure that those mistakes are used to generate better performance in future.

Gallup organisation conducted some 40,000 interviews with leaders and top managers over a period of 30 years. As a result, they compiled a list of 20 ‘talents’ or ‘themes’ which they defined as recurring patterns of thought, feeling and behaviours that predispose someone to leadership (Fulmer and Wagner, 1999). The ‘talents’ are divided into the following categories:

#### Direction – relates to a leader’s abilities to provide motivation

1	<i>vision</i>	able to create and project beneficial images
2	<i>concept</i>	able to give the best explanation of most events
3	<i>focus</i>	is goal oriented

#### Drive to execute – relates to motivation

4	<i>ego drive</i>	defines oneself as significant
5	<i>competition</i>	has the desire to win
6	<i>achiever</i>	is energetic
7	<i>courage</i>	relished challenges
8	<i>activator</i>	is proactive

#### Relationships – relates to capacity to develop relationships with others

9	<i>relater</i>	can build trust and be caring
10	<i>developer</i>	desires to help people grow
11	<i>multirelater</i>	has wide circle of relationships
12	<i>individual perception</i>	recognises people’s individuality
13	<i>stimulator</i>	can create good feelings in others
14	<i>team</i>	can get people to help each other

#### Management systems – relates to management abilities

15	<i>performance orientation</i>	is goal oriented
16	<i>discipline</i>	needs to structure time and work environment
17	<i>responsibility/ethics</i>	can take psychological ownership of own behaviour
18	<i>arranger</i>	can coordinate people and activities
19	<i>operational</i>	can administer systems that help people be more effective
20	<i>strategic thinking</i>	is able to do ‘what if?’ thinking and create paths to future goals

Further research published last year adds another four qualities. In addition to the core skills of vision, strategic direction and so on, inspirational leaders demonstrate that they:

- **selectively show their weaknesses;**  
By exposing vulnerability, they reveal their approach-ability and humanity.
- **rely heavily on intuition to gauge the appropriate timing and course of their actions;**  
Their ability to collect and interpret soft data helps them know when and how to act.
- **manage employees with...tough empathy;**  
Inspirational leaders empathise passionately – and realistically – with people and they care intensely about the work employees do.
- **reveal their differences;**  
They capitalise on what is unique about themselves (Goffee and Jones, 2000).

The researchers behind the study, Goffee and Jones, claim that successful leadership relies on the interplay between all four of these qualities but stress that they cannot be used mechanically. Rather, they must become a part of someone's personality if they are to be effective. Although some will have a head start in acquiring a capacity for leadership, to some extent it is a learned capacity, at which most can improve.

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## Part 2 – A brief guide to leadership theories and models

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Although we all realise the importance of leadership, it still remains an elusive concept. Theorists tend to fall into three groups. Those who focus on personal characteristics, those who concentrate on the leader – follower situation and those who attempt to relate leadership styles to the overall organisation context and climate (Burnes 2000).

### Leadership models

#### The personal characteristics approach to leadership

Although there have been many accounts of successful leaders (mainly military ones) throughout history, research on leadership started in earnest in the 1950s with the appearance of a first theory. The traits theory attempted to identify individual qualities that predisposed someone to leadership. In other words, it was believed that some people were simply born to lead because they possessed a set of innate skills and abilities. To some extent, this is true because leadership is an art and not a science but numerous empirical studies have failed to reveal any consistent pattern of traits. Furthermore, it does not help us understand the type of behaviours that characterise good leadership.

The stress on leadership gave rise to a number of universal theories (Burnes 2000). One of the best-known leadership models was Blake and Moulton's managerial grid (often referred to as the leadership grid), and remains a popular training tool today. It positions four types of leadership between the two axes of people and task. A leader could be more task- or people-oriented and the most desirable leaders scored high on both – the so-called 'team leaders' who successfully combine a democratic approach with the right amount of non-authoritarian control. This approach can be used to get people to assess their management style and to judge whether it is appropriate for their position. The empirical evidence support for it, however, is limited.

#### The leader-follower situation approach

Given that any generalisation does not particularly help our understanding of leadership, researchers' attention moved to identifying situations in which leaders are effective and to concentrate on leaders' actions and subsequently on the context in which they led, out of which behaviourist and situational theories of leadership were born. The action-centred leadership approach of the 1960s (but still very relevant today), focused on three core activities of leaders – achieving the required results (the task), by building an effective team and growing and developing each individual. Although the activities are interdependent on each other, the underlying objective is achieving the task. Even today, achieving purpose is a crucial part of leadership. However, this model, and other situational theories of leadership, have little to offer on the necessary behaviours of good leaders, i.e. how particular leadership behaviour affects subordinate performance. Furthermore, the situational approach was based on recognition that leaders needed to be technically excellent. Getting ordinary people to do extraordinary things, however, requires more than just having the 'hard' technical skills.

#### The contextual (or contingency) approach to leadership

The contextual approach to leadership has developed out of the recognition that a manager's effectiveness may be determined as much by the nature of the organisation in which he or she operates. It concentrates on leadership style rather than behaviour. Contingency theory of leadership asserts that leadership style depends on various variables including traits, behaviour and situation. It recognises that one leadership style will not be appropriate in all situations and that leaders change their behaviour from situation to situation. Vroom and Yetton (1973) and James MacGregor Burns (1978) have developed the most influential of contextual approaches.

Burns identified two basic organisational states, convergent and divergent, and two matching leadership styles, transactional and transformational. A convergent state, where the organisation is operating under stable conditions, lends itself to a transactional style of leadership

which is based on optimising performance through incremental changes within existing policy and structure. A divergent state is a situation where changes in the environment challenge the organisation's established goals and way of working. In such a situation, transformational leaders are required who aim to change followers' behaviour and beliefs and unite them behind a new vision of the organisation's future (Burnes 2000).

The contextual approach does not invalidate trait and situational theories but rather emphasises that managers need to adapt their approach according to the context that they find themselves in. In reality, most managers combine the best of both characteristics. A balance is required between 'take-action entrepreneurs and their constant questioning of the rules....and the discipline and co-ordination of conventional management' (Kanter 1989).

### Transformational leader

<i>Charisma:</i>	Provides vision and a sense of mission, instils pride, gains respect and trust.
<i>Inspiration:</i>	Communicates high expectations, uses symbols to focus efforts, expresses important purposes in simple ways.
<i>Intellectual stimulation:</i>	Promotes intelligence, rationality and careful problem solving.
<i>Individualised consideration:</i>	Gives personal attention, treats each employee individually, coaches, and advises.

### Transactional leader

<i>Contingent reward:</i>	Contracts exchange of rewards for effort, promises rewards for good performance, recognises accomplishments.
<i>Management by exception (active):</i>	Watches and searches for deviations from rules and standards, takes corrective action.
<i>Management by exception (passive):</i>	Intervenes only if standards are not met.
<i>Laissez-faire:</i>	Abdicates responsibilities, avoids making decisions.

Recent research has concentrated on the differences between leaders and managers and the importance of vision. We have also witnessed the emergence of a new model entitled transformational leadership. It tries to avoid the pitfalls of the previous theories by maintaining that leaders are not characterised by a set of specific skills but instead engage in a process by which leaders and followers continuously push one another to higher levels of motivation.

*From: Bass, B (1990), Transactional to Transformational Leadership: Learning to Share the Vision reprinted in Steer et al (1996), Motivation and Leadership at Work. © The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc. Reprinted by permission.*

A further limitation to many leadership theories stems from the fact that the research and literature has been based on western organisations. Leader behaviour is

generally interpreted differently within different national cultures. A supportive style in one country may be perceived as threatening in another for example.

## Part 3 – Leaders versus manager?

Peter Drucker, one of the most famous leadership gurus, once remarked that most of what we call management consists of making it difficult for people to do their jobs. It is a facetious way of saying that the task of management is to impose structure on an organisation and order its processes. The statement could exemplify the recent trend in leadership literature that insists on making a distinction between leaders and managers. Managers, it is said, deal with structures and organise staff and resources. Leaders, on the other hand, offer vision and motivation and deal with change. Management, inadvertently or not, is presented as being dull and mundane (albeit necessary), while leadership is seen as creative and exciting.

Some of these claims are undoubtedly valid but only insofar as it is true that being at the top of the hierarchy does not make you a leader. Emphasising a distinction between leaders and managers too much, however, is almost like giving permission to the latter to be unexceptional. Being a manager is also about leading your team, being inspirational and having vision about your future. Maintaining that this is the sole preserve of the privileged few can be seen as like granting a licence for bad management. Henry Mintzberg, in his book *The Nature of Managerial Work* in 1973, demonstrated that it is very difficult to separate the function of managers from those of leaders. In the typical corporate office environment, managers have diverse roles where they combine the less

romantic but practical activities such as organising, planning and resource allocating, with leadership skills to motivate and activate subordinates. The important point that Mintzberg made, however, is that all these activities are inherent in management roles but the degree to which they play a primary role depends on the level of the role within the organisation. An element of leadership is inherent in most management roles, particularly now that many organisations pass decision-making responsibilities further down their hierarchies.

In the 21st century, we can go one step further. Is it not also desirable to have leadership qualities in others who are not perhaps in a management role? The process of empowerment should also include enabling others to organise, motivate and make things possible for others, as well as enthusing and inspiring those around them.

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## Part 4 – Business leadership in the new economy

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The importance of leadership can be traced to the earliest human endeavours. From Alexander the Great and Napoleon to Hitler and Gandhi, we have always reserved a huge amount of respect or loathing for people capable of influencing our behaviour. Business leaders too have had a profound impact on companies. Think Jack Welch of General Electric or Richard Branson of Virgin – individuals who seem to single-handedly transform the fortunes of their organisations.

Successful companies have always needed strong leaders. However, in the new business patterns emerging from the ashes of the dot com revolution, there seems to be enough evidence to suggest that they will become even more indispensable. The new world of business demands a new way of working, one that is primarily characterised by its responsiveness to change. We should not forget, however, that the principles of effective leadership in the e-world will not have changed.

### Leadership and change

Nearly everyday we are reminded that the future core competence of companies will be in their ability to continuously and creatively destroy and remake themselves in order to meet new demands. John F Kennedy famously remarked that change is the law of life. The accelerating pace of changes in the business and economic environment means that, for many businesses, the future is uncertain. Real change leaders have a sustained commitment to change and drum up courage in those around them to challenge the status quo and to gain a commitment to a better way of doing things. On the other hand, those who adopt a transactional management

style, based simply on formal authority derived from position in the hierarchy, a rule-follower by any other name, may not be inclined to taking a new approach to doing things.

A vast majority of change programmes fail because of the lack of buy-in from employees and not because of technical hitches (Cambridge Management Consulting, 2001). The human factor can be all-important and it is leaders who are capable of galvanising staff into going the extra mile that is demanded in contemporary business. Because they operate on the basis of trust, employees are more likely to follow despite the uncertainty of outcome.

### Leadership and recruitment

GE's Jack Welch once said that he has only three jobs as a CEO, one of which was selecting the right people. One consequence of a successful economy in the recent years has been the crisis in recruitment and retention. The shift to knowledge-intensive economy means that individuals are much more expensive to replace. Skilled staff can move jobs relatively easily, which in turn means they require more than financial rewards to keep them motivated. Indeed, they need to feel a sense of value, fulfil-

### Leading into the e-world

- **Technology**  
Knowledge gathering and sharing in an organisation can be improved by the Internet, intranet, e-mail and mobile communications. A leader should recognise the advantages of these technologies for improving organisational dynamics such as increasing the speed of communication, managing time better and building relationships with remote parts of the organisation. Such technology can also improve a company's profile.
- **Communication**  
Despite the advent of this technology, traditional leadership approaches are still valid and the need for effective interpersonal skills should not be underestimated. How to listen, question, present and write, how to conduct an effective meeting and how to get the best out of a team – such skills can be continually improved and self-development in these areas will help to improve your contribution as a leader.
- **Relationships**  
Electronic communication is not appropriate where a vision needs to be shared and commitment gained or there are sensitive work issues that need discussing and/or personal attention needed. Persuading and influencing, for example, are not effectively done using e-mail. Face-to-face communication and being visible remains crucial to becoming a good leader.

ment and – above all – belonging if they are to stay. Companies that people want to work for (both in terms of the number of new recruits and staff turnover rates) are usually those that create such a strong sense of belonging that some have labelled them ‘cultish’.

It is their leaders who create this kind of environment. Culture, in other words, does not happen by accident, the influential people in an organisation create it.

## New skills for future leaders

Leaders themselves will have to acquire new skills in order to steer the business of tomorrow. They will have to lead at a distance, so to speak, as outsourcing and home working become more common. They will need to learn to ‘lead out’ teams of distant workers over whom they might not have any direct supervisory power. In addition, they will have to act a lot faster if they are to keep up with the pace of change.

## Part 5 – Barriers to successful leadership

In theory, good leadership – although not an exact science – can be achieved. In practice, however, this often does not happen. Individuals who are genuinely inspirational and can build trust, integrity and fairness with their people tend to be the exception. Admittedly, many have not been adequately trained, coached or mentored but there are managers who have been on many a course yet still fail to improve.

What gets in the way of good leadership? The easiest way of categorising the obstacles is by dividing them into personal and organisational, although they are heavily influenced by one another.

### Personal barriers

People have ingrained modes of thought and feeling which prevent them from becoming good leaders. Often, the individual in question has no idea these exist and can only find out and alter his or her behaviour through constant and honest feedback.

Although there can be many personal barriers, the most common one seems to be low self-esteem. Such individuals strive either for self-aggrandisement or try too hard to be liked. They are either the office tyrants or the sycophants. In either case, they command little respect because they are inconsistent and fail to hold themselves or their team accountable. This eventually creates a climate of perverse incentives and mistrust.

### Organisational barriers

It can, however, work the other way round, where weak organisational culture seeps through to individual level. The company ‘way of doing things’ can have a profound effect on its leadership. For example, it could be the structure of an organisation that prevents good leadership from developing. Rigid hierarchies, in which employees do not have a voice and feel disempowered, are unlikely to produce successful leaders simply because staff are not given the opportunity or the belief. Authority, role or status does not confer leadership.

Companies with poor communication and internal conflict will find it difficult to unite behind a common goal. For example, downsizing under the label of creating shareholder value and appraisal schemes that do not allow proper feedback breed cynicism rather than inspire loyalty. All this adds up to a widespread culture so entrenched that it becomes impossible for any individual to combat it.

### Nature versus nurture

There are those who favour the nature versus nurture debate and maintain that some people simply were not born to lead. This, and not the lack of training or support, is the main barrier to successful leadership. Although, there may be an element of truth in this, it is essentially a poor excuse for poor organisational behaviour.

Admittedly, some people may never become great leaders but the majority of employees can become inspirational and trustworthy. It is not about possessing exceptional personality traits but simply about good management. Leadership exists in a relationship between leaders and followers and as such can be acquired and learnt. Effective mentoring and self-development on various levels can support the nurturing process. Networking should also be recognised as an opportunity to learn from other leaders.

The Nature of Inspiration (taken from a presentation by Richard Olivier, recorded 22-26 March 2000 for a course delivered by the Industrial Society) is detailed opposite.

## How as a leader can you inspire others?

1. The importance of imagination, i.e. the prerequisite of bringing the new into being, has probably never been so eloquently captured than by Einstein who said that imagination is more important than knowledge, for while knowledge points towards what there is, imagination points to what there will be. In today's world, in which the pace of change in the macro environment is so fast, being adaptable requires imagination. And imagination means looking beyond the meetings and action points. Imagination enables the flexibility and adaptability required to survive effectively as a leader.
2. The need to think beyond oneself and to consider others. To consider others is to think with them and to ask oneself, 'how can I serve us better?'
3. People need a sense of meaning and purpose of why they are in the organisation. The root of the personal inspiration in leadership is recognising your individual connection to the organisation and purpose within it and this will be something that you recognise yourself i.e. not the party line. Finding this purpose is a prerequisite to finding inspiration. Future possibilities and your own potential are limited without it.
4. With a purpose in place, there is then the space to develop vision. The mantle of leadership depends on the extent that you are able to carry a vision and this depends on the extent to which you are followable. Vision adds meaning to peoples' working lives. Vision is seeing what life could be like while dealing with life as it is. A vision must always deal with life's qualities rather than just quantities. A mission statement, for example, should be based on something that adds value to the people of your organisation rather than just a numerical target. A qualitative statement is just as important as a quantitative one.
5. Building a consensus around the vision requires political skills. There is a need to learn how to talk to people, to identify who you need to talk to and what they want to hear. Getting influential supporters on your side is critical to carrying out your vision. Building relationships with key people to build trust is critical to gaining support for your vision.
6. Gaining commitment and engaging your colleagues requires face-to-face contact. Inspiration can only be moved across face-to-face rather than in electronic form or by telephone. Securing commitment from others requires:
  - an energy so that others can believe in the vision too;
  - the vision to be in alignment with the organisation's vision;
  - a balance between reason and action – a leader needs to think about how much planning is required;
  - empowerment – a vision needs to be shared and you need to be prepared lose ownership to get things done.

## Part 6 – Leadership training

Anthony Jay claimed that the only training for leadership is leadership. In fact, research studies have shown that people who exhibit leadership qualities later in life have all got one thing in common – they were given an opportunity to lead very early on in their careers (Kotter, 1990).

Organisations should, therefore, strive to create the kind of environment where leadership is encouraged at all levels of the organisation and as early as possible. This effectively means empowering employees by allowing them to be creative and to generate ideas while using mistakes as a learning opportunity. In this way, a leadership-friendly culture can take root at all levels of the organisation, rather than just at the top. If necessary, this can be reinforced by training, although training can never be a substitute for experience.

It has become the norm for companies to run a range of training courses but there can often be a lack of focus on achieving the basic tenets of effective management and good leadership. The ability to see the bigger picture and grasp a firm purpose and objective and an inexhaustible optimism and passion, all speak of a mind that has not been hindered by detail, restricted by bad practices and stunted by a lack of opportunity. On the contrary – they show a mind that has been allowed to remain free, open and receptive.

## Part 7 – References for further reading and bibliography

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An overview of leadership styles and models.
- [www.nwlink.com/~donclark/leader](http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/leader)  
An extensive website devoted to leadership – everything from models to practical guidance.

- [www.cba.neu.edu/~ewertheim/leader/leader/htm](http://www.cba.neu.edu/~ewertheim/leader/leader/htm)  
Links to articles about leadership (some links broken).
- [www.mapnp.org/library/ldrship/ldrship.htm](http://www.mapnp.org/library/ldrship/ldrship.htm)  
Another exhaustive website with links to articles on subjects connected to leadership.
- [www.infotrain.magill.unisa.edu.au/epub/People/denec/essay1.htm](http://www.infotrain.magill.unisa.edu.au/epub/People/denec/essay1.htm)  
de Neuville, Chris: Are Managers Leaders?

## Leadership courses

- CIMA Mastercourses – Leadership and team working and Leading the new finance function.
- The Industrial Society, as part of its campaign to improve leadership at all levels of organisations, has a number of high profile training courses, books, videos and reports. Information can be found on [www.ind-soc.co.uk](http://www.ind-soc.co.uk)

## Other CIMA Technical Briefings

- Emotional Intelligence (EI) claims to distinguish between those who move up to and are successful in positions of leadership. The EI briefing provides insight on how this can be achieved.