

LODESTAR

LEADERSHIP EQUILIBRIUM

Achieving balance in a
challenging climate

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Under pressure

We live in turbulent times, the world has become less predictable, more divided and increasingly volatile. This backdrop creates a real challenge for leaders across the board in terms of how to respond, a challenge aggravated by the fact that, according to the Edelman Trust Barometer (2024), institutions and leaders are experiencing historically low levels of trust.

Commercial organisations have a pivotal societal role, providing employment, community and purpose for billions globally as well as stoking the engine for innovation and economic growth. Having worked in the private sector over decades, I have witnessed and experienced a myriad of organisational cultures as companies grapple with the challenges of setting direction and persuading others to follow them with enthusiasm, whilst delivering profits and shareholder return.

The engagement equation of **Happy Staff = Happy customers = Commercial Success**, as brilliantly laid out by Gurnek Bains (2007), sustains, though I would suggest has become more complex in terms of understanding what constitutes a happy workforce. You only have to float a view about flexible working on social media to unleash passionate and conflicting perspectives.

It seems clear therefore that how organisations are led really matters, leaders set the cultural tone and arguably their job has never been harder.





The rest is history

Before I share my perspective on what is needed now, I thought it was worth reflecting on some of the significant developments in leadership theory over the last 100 years or so, with the caveat that this is not an exhaustive list.

At the beginning of the 20th century, scientific management (1911) dubbed Taylorism was very much in fashion and described humans as cogs in the machine. This was further systemised by Henry Ford in the mass production of the model T Ford making motoring much more accessible.

Both were very much rooted in the principles of process management rather than leadership per se, this arguably began with Trait Theory which had origins in Carlyle's Great Man Theory (1840) and was expanded on by Stogdill (1948). This theory advocated that certain individuals possess traits that make them natural leaders, i.e. leaders are born not made.

Behavioural Leadership Theory then began to suggest that the way you behave, not simply your personality, determined your impact as a leader — alternative styles started to be codified e.g. Autocratic, Democratic, and Laissez-faire as identified by Lewin (1948).

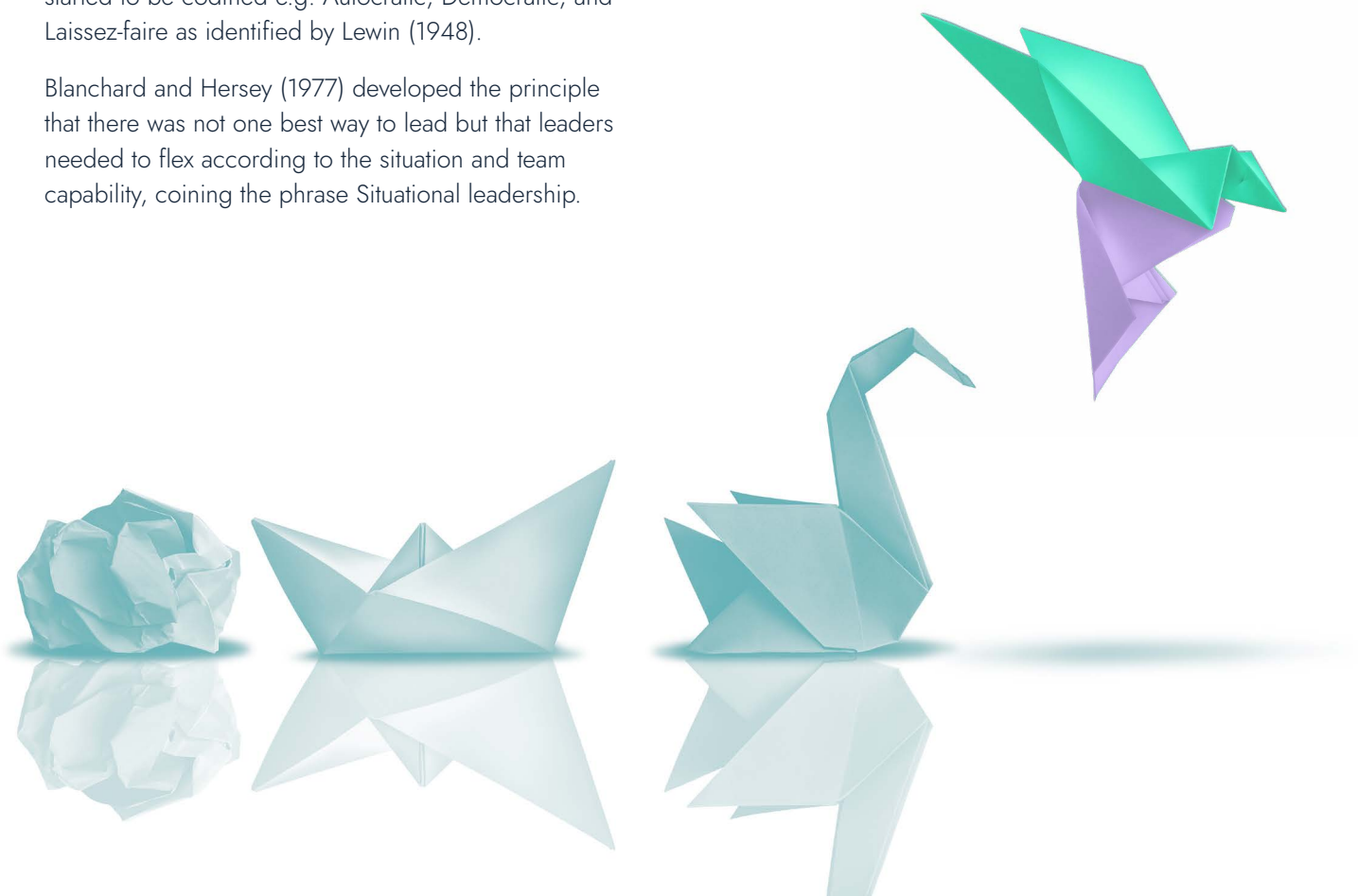
Blanchard and Hersey (1977) developed the principle that there was not one best way to lead but that leaders needed to flex according to the situation and team capability, coining the phrase Situational leadership.

Somewhat turning things on their head, Servant Leadership (Greenleaf, 1970) theorised that the leader is in service of helping others to reach their full potential.

James Downton (1973) first coined the phrase Transformational Leadership which encouraged leaders to inspire teams into exceptional performance and innovation.

Most recently, leaders have been encouraged to adopt Authentic Leadership in response to a desire for transparency and engendering trust. This has at times been intertwined with a call for more Inclusive Leadership along with the emerging profile of Diversity and Inclusion where the stated aspiration is for all to feel valued.

My intention is not to provide critique, though what stands out to me are the parallels between the evolution of leadership theory and societal shifts, each responding to each other. I also sense that for some leaders it has at times felt confusing, as though they are being given conflicting advice.





So what now?

As I said at the beginning, we are living with unprecedented uncertainty and pace of change which requires a multi-faceted response. We need leaders who can navigate the complexity of the context and adapt their behaviour and actions accordingly.

This question has been explored by some notable experts.

Charles Hampden Turner (1990) highlights the principle of strategic dilemmas which hold organisations back and advocates working on a collaborative continuum to resolve them.

Mihaly Csikszentmihaly's seminal work on Flow (1990) speaks of achieving a balance between skill and challenge for optimal motivation and performance.

Smith, Lewis and Tushman (2016) argue that leaders need to move from Either/Or to Both/And leadership, 'nurturing the unique aspects of competing constituencies'.

In *Ten Years to Midnight* (2020) Blair Sheppard identifies 4 Global crises and proposes solutions including Paradoxes of Leadership, where he describes seemingly competing capabilities and suggests that leaders need to 'dance on both sides of a sword' (pg 163).

These principles of dilemmas, balance and paradox really resonated with me and then came the opportunity to bring them to life.

Making it real

Organisational culture is a key differentiator for businesses and motivator for staff, and, revisiting the equation, a driver of customer/brand engagement and business success.

We at Lodestar have experienced significant demand for cultural interventions e.g. in the areas of Purpose, Values and Leadership Behaviours. Our work is always designed within the real-world context of the organisation we are supporting; we aim to spend time understanding how life is on the inside whilst bringing some external objectivity.

Working on a leadership frame for a client, it became clear that they were grappling with seemingly competing priorities. They had in the past been asking leaders to take a position that required them to choose skills in a binary way excluding some that in reality needed to be maintained alongside their seemingly opposing capabilities. For example, as leaders became more senior, they were asked to focus on the big picture and leave the detail to others, which was making

some feel uncomfortable and potentially adding risk into the system. Our belief is that senior leaders need to be able to manage both, and flex between them as necessary, potentially easier said than done, it can feel quite stretching!

Whilst not an easy proposition, this reflection really resonated with our client and gave us the platform to develop what we describe as a **Balanced Leadership** model.

This model incorporates the concepts of paradox and balance to help leaders navigate across the dilemmas they face on a day-to-day basis. When presented with the framework, a key realisation for leaders is this is not a shift from one leadership quality to the other — it is about embracing both and demonstrating indicators on both sides e.g. *listening carefully to my team to understand their motivation and providing clear objectives and holding them to account for delivery.*



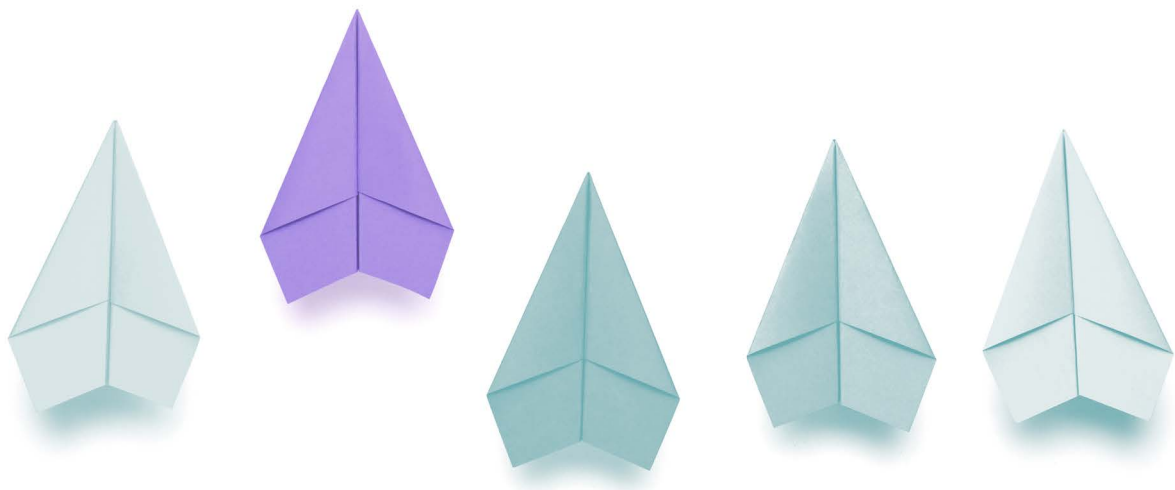
Below is an illustrative generic example, the principles of which are then applied to the unique context of each client.

BALANCED LEADERSHIP

Innovative AND Dependable		Strategic AND Rigorous		Ambitious AND Ethical		Caring AND Directive	
Innovative	Dependable	Strategic	Rigorous	Ambitious	Ethical	Caring	Directive
Indicators	Indicators	Indicators	Indicators	Indicators	Indicators	Indicators	Indicators
I encourage the development of new ideas and products	I can be relied on to deliver on my commitments	I set a clear sense of direction	I ensure processes are followed thoroughly	I push the team to deliver growth	I don't compromise on doing the right thing	I listen carefully to my team to understand what motivates them	I provide clear objectives and hold team members to account for delivery
Further indicators are added to each side of the pairs to complete the framework							

Our experience tells us that a meaningful leadership framework must be rooted in the cultural heart of the organisation and so the pairings and the indicators are designed specifically for each organisation that can be levelled to reflect the leadership structure.

We work closely with leaders and their team to really get under the skin of the strategic dilemmas facing the organisation. We then build a unique, pragmatic version of 'what good looks like'. This then paves the way for consistent performance management, promotions and resourcing, and a defined leadership culture.





Making it your own

If this strikes a chord, we would love to explore how we might work with you, so please get in touch:

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