



The changing nature of work

Leadership



Leading in ambiguity and constant change

Business is moving so quickly, technology even faster, and the potential for disruption is vast. Leaders can't simply 'keep up' – rather they must steer their organisations and teams into the unknown.

In today's environment of rapid technology, constant disruption, globalisation and connectivity, organisations are altering dramatically, new businesses are emerging, and success relies on being able to adapt quickly. This places new demands on leaders across all industry sectors.

Dr Jane Gunn, Partner People & Change and Australian Talent Management Lead, KPMG, says the way leaders operate has to adjust to this context.

"Leading the way we did when environments and organisations were more stable, where we could distinguish between change and 'business as usual', simply won't work anymore," she says.

If this sounds testing, it is, explains Kathy Hilyard, also a Partner in People & Change at KPMG. She says technology has played a big part in creating the ambiguity leaders must deal with.

"New technologies create an environment where new ways to conduct business are emerging much faster; where our business models are changing," she says. "This feeds into the expectations of customers, and in the case of public sector organisations, citizens."

Hilyard says leaders are constantly facing volatility and ambiguity. As they continually adapt strategies, pivot their product or service offerings, grow or shrink their workforces, or quickly react to shifts in customer demands – they need to adjust the way that they lead.

"Leaders need to think about their role as one of creating organisations that are adaptive and can deal with emergent issues," Hilyard says.

Shifting expectations of leadership

In this multifaceted environment, where new challenges, technologies and risks arise each day, one person cannot be expected to have all the answers. Organisations need to shift from a hierarchical style of leadership to a more collaborative 'network style', Hilyard says.

"Positional authority doesn't rule anymore. That's not to say that there aren't times when tasks need to be completed, where someone with the right expertise knows what to do, and people just need to get on with it," she says.

Business outcomes are increasingly achieved through collaboration across divisions of a business, or with people external to a company. Hilyard looks to the leadership 'ecosystem' engaged by many technology companies as an example of this shift.

"Companies such as Facebook and Apple function as a 'networked organisation', with more organic systems, rather than with an organisational chart with boxes laid out on a page," she says.

Hilyard says this environment also reflects how changing employee expectations are impacting leaders.

"The requirement for success in these models is more about facilitation of work and networks and leading from anywhere. It's not about appointing the eldest, the most experienced, or the person in the highest level job. It's about anticipating and responding to what the context demands," she says.

Changing leadership approach

Strategy and solutions were once commonly executed by a subject matter expert, but are now more likely to come from gathering insights from staff and stakeholders that are close to a problem.

“It is moving leaders from a strong ‘task-orientation’, where leadership skill-sets are about scheduling and delivering, to more of a ‘facilitator orientation’, which is about designing processes to engage people, facilitating discourse, guiding and equipping people to work together,” she says.

This requires self-awareness, strong people skills and the ability to analyse context and make choices about the right approach. Hilyard calls this “conscious leadership”.

“Conscious leadership is asking deeper questions about what leadership means and what is required in a given situation. Leaders need to be aware of when they are exercising positional authority vs. leadership. Or when they need to be the expert vs. facilitating the input of others,” she says.

Being open to new ways of leading is vital, Gunn adds, as well as being comfortable that complexity is now a constant state of play.

“The complexity requires people to look at problems from multiple perspectives to come to an answer. Relying on hierarchy or believing we can achieve outcomes within organisational ‘silos’ no longer serves us well,” she says.

Listening, engaging others, and helping people to see meaning in their work helps achieve good outcomes.

“There are some extremely positive examples of leaders who have shifted from the old paradigm. It is inspiring to see people who are actively reflecting and experimenting; the power of small changes has massive ‘ripple effects’ throughout their organisations,” Gunn says.

Support for a new approach

Individual leadership change is an important part of how organisations will be capable of not only surviving, but thriving, in today’s environment. However, Hilyard says it is also important to look at the system in which people lead. Cultivating a new leadership style takes courage and conscious effort on the part of the organisation as a whole, the leaders, and the people they are leading.

“Leaders need a lot of support to not revert, because the system’s bigger than they are, and the organisation’s culture will require focused leadership attention,” she says.

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