CHAPTER 6

Leadership Behaviors That Drive Engagement

The challenge of leadership is to be strong but not rude; be kind, but not weak; be bold, but not a bully; be humble, but not timid; be proud, but not arrogant; have humor, but without folly.

—Jim Rohn

THE CHALLENGE OF effective leadership begins with individual leader behavior. More than your intellect, technical skills, talent, personality, processes, or strategy, individual leader behavior is the single most important predictor of an organization's performance. The primary success of leaders depends on their ability to match their behavior to unpredictable and changing situations. Context matters and contextual variables create challenges for how a leader deploys strategy, makes decisions, manages processes, and uses technical skills. Context and contextual variables also create challenges for how a leader needs to use behavioral skills.

The ability of leaders to remain flexible in their behavior no matter the situation and context is the key variable in promoting and sustaining employee engagement to drive performance. Leading from your upper brain means managing behavior effectively in response to the stress created by changing context. Doing so allows you to connect to and engage your technical skills to function at optimal levels of performance.

THE MAKING OF EFFECTIVE LEADERS

We know that a leader's ability to manage context is a critical factor for evaluating leadership effectiveness. Consequently, to achieve organizational performance, either the organization needs to adapt by matching different leaders to different contexts, or leaders need to adapt by matching their behaviors to different contexts. The fundamental question we seek to answer is this: What kind of leader should organizations search for to create engagement and get results in these increasingly complex, chaotic, and uncertain times?

Contingency theories exist to try to explain why leadership effectiveness depends on the former approach—matching different leader traits (including gender) to the context or situation. We will discuss some of these contingency models before presenting our behavior-based solution for creating effective leaders: We believe that effective leadership is the product of adaptable leaders learning to match their behaviors to the context, *apart* from other traits those leaders might possess.

There is much debate about the key elements that make an effective leader. All the approaches discussed in this chapter are theoretical. Some have more scientific support than others, and scholars do not always agree on the criteria for effective leadership. This much is certain: Any company or organization that fails to invest in the development of its people, particularly its leaders, will always underperform organizations that do.

We will begin by dispelling five fundamental myths of effective leadership:

1. Leaders are born, not made; leadership is a collection of innate traits that cannot be taught.
2. Leadership is the action of an individual genius—the proverbial rock star often at the top of the organizational chart.
3. Leaders must be charismatic extroverts to inspire and motivate their team members to connect to vision and engage in their work.
4. Leadership requires formal authority, title, and power.
5. A common set of traits defines all effective leaders.

Despite decades of research and study in leadership, none of these leadership myths has any scientific support. We believe that effective leadership is about transforming people and leading their upper brains to higher levels of performance outcomes. John Kotter laid the foundation for this line of reasoning more than a decade ago when he promoted the following three fundamental processes of effective leadership (Kotter and Heskett 2011):

1. Establishing a compelling vision and strategies for achieving it.
2. Aligning people by communicating the vision, building shared understanding, and influencing people to believe in the vision.
3. Motivating people to work to achieve the vision.

Within this framework, we begin our discussion of contingency theory and some of the key related theories. We will demonstrate that modern, knowledge-oriented organizations require a new way of thinking about leadership development and new standards for evaluating leadership effectiveness.

Contingency Theories of Leadership

In any major field of study, there are a variety of theories that seek to provide meaning and understanding to phenomena associated with that field. Leadership is no exception. The four main theories under the general contingency theory grouping are: (1) Fiedler's contingency theory, (2) the situational leadership theory, (3) the path–goal theory, and (4) the decision-making theory. These theories share similarities, but there are some significant differences.

Fred Fiedler (1967) posited one of the first contingency models of leadership. Fiedler's contingency theory proposes that effective leadership hinges not only on the leader's style but also on the leader's control over the situation. This theory only applies to closely supervised groups that are not team-based. According to Fiedler's theory, disposition is the main trait that defines leadership capability. Research accumulated over the years does not tend to support this approach (Landy 1989).

Ten years after Fiedler, Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard (1977) devised what many people know informally as the Hersey-Blanchard model or the situational leadership model. Unlike other leadership theories, the Hersey-Blanchard model rejects the idea that corporations require a single approach to leadership. Instead, the model proposes a leadership style that adapts to the unique circumstances of each workplace. The success of these styles depends, in part, on the employee's job maturity (high skill versus low skill) and psychological maturity (high motivation versus low motivation). The situational leadership model is popular, but it is difficult to apply in the real world, especially in groups with widely varying skills and experience. Most importantly, the empirical support for this model and its propositions is weak.

Path–goal theory combines two popular leadership theories, goal-setting theory and expectancy theory, to propose that effective leaders help their direct-report team members attain their work goals. Under path–goal theory, leaders are responsible for

ensuring that their subordinates are equipped to achieve their assigned goals.

The decision-making theory of leadership posits that effective leaders assess situations and then determine how much support the group will give toward the effort, adjusting to a participative leadership style. Three decades of research have altered the original decision-making model considerably. The fundamental problem with this theory is that its assumptions are all derived from a twentieth-century perspective of the relationship between leaders and followers. It requires significant refinement to have any relevance for leaders in the twenty-first century, who face the challenges of a global economy, an increasingly technological evolution of the workplace, contributions of group effort instead of individual effort, and nontraditional employment conditions.

The main premise of all these contingency theories of leadership is that the style of leadership is what affects success or failure in a given situation. In any situation, the task, the leader's personality traits, and the personality traits shared among team members determine whether a particular leadership style will be effective. In other words, the basic assumption of these theories is that leadership success or failure is situational (Binney 2018).

Leadership Styles

Advocates for contingency theory approaches typically identify an individual's leadership style using personality-based assessment tools and then assign leadership roles or tasks based on the results. For example, the visioning process is supposed to be natural for someone with a dominant, task-oriented leadership style, but harder for a person who has a supportive, people-oriented leadership style. A supportive style is supposedly better suited to encouraging collaboration, while someone with a dominant style supposedly struggles at this.

Proponents of this type of model encourage leaders to embrace their primary style but also to step out of their comfort zone and exhibit some of the other leadership traits when necessary. The major problem with that approach is that stepping out of your personality's comfort zone is extremely difficult and requires a lot of effort and energy. Ask any introvert to behave like an extrovert and observe their reaction. This kind of flexing is stressful and negatively affects other aspects of the person's performance.

Many industrial and organizational psychology professionals are captivated by personality-based approaches to leadership development. Human resources professionals have historically used personality testing as part of their recruitment and promotion processes despite challenges from psychologists asserting that such tests are not valid predictors of job performance. Researcher Neal W. Schmitt put it more bluntly when discussing a joint paper: "Why are we looking at personality as a valid predictor of job performance when the validities haven't changed in the past twenty years and are still close to zero?" (Amble 2007). *The Cult of Personality Testing,* by Annie Murphy Paul (2005), reveals the flaws of personality assessments in terms of poor interpretation of the results, but also their poor use of the scientific method and the lack of reliability and validity of these tools.

One driver behind these testing models is an effort to determine what it takes to alter a person's personality, or even whether it is possible. The Personality Change Consortium, led by Wiebke Bleidorn and Christopher Hopwood of the University of California, Davis (2019), found evidence in one research review that "personality traits can change through persistent intervention and major life events" but that such changes would be difficult. Behavior changes, by comparison, are much easier.

We take up this debate between personality and behavior in greater detail in part III, because it is vitally important to your leadership development strategy. Suffice it to say here that the research is clear—personality is a poor predictor of performance. Your personality is who you are; your behavior is what you do.

Consequently, your leadership effectiveness is a matter of aligning your behavior with the specific requirements of your job and the constant shifts of contextual variables. Creating and maintaining this alignment requires you to lead with your upper brain.

Collaboration

Leadership, at its core, is about getting a group of people to accomplish something that one person cannot do alone. Effective leadership is about inspiring others to achieve performance excellence to accomplish mutually beneficial and meaningful objectives. Effective leaders rely on collaboration and trust the collective intelligence and talent of their teams, knowing that people, not processes, strengthen or weaken the organization's pursuit of continuous performance excellence.

Effective leaders succeed by relying on behaviors that create trust, compassion, safety, and hope among other leaders and team members. They act with integrity, authenticity, and personal accountability. This effective leadership persona creates powerful collaborations to achieve performance results and drive continuous performance improvement.

A true collaboration is characterized by effective communication, cooperative attitudes, and integrated teams; these traits distinguish a collaborative team from a group of people assigned to complete technical tasks. These behaviors are evident in the science-based characteristics of high-performing teams. Behavioral attributes (including interpersonal relationship skills) that are commonly and incorrectly called soft skills are really the hard skills that enable the leader to be effective—self-aware, self-managed, collaborative, and connected.

Low employee motivation, high burnout rates, refusal to engage in work, mistrust of management, and poor technical performance can all result when a leader consistently displays negative, disruptive, toxic behavior. Your leadership obligation is to

create a culture of well-being and performance excellence where your people discover personal joy in their work and provide you, their leader, with extraordinary results. Ultimately, your leadership effectiveness in creating engagement and driving performance results to their highest levels requires you to build high-performing teams. You cannot succeed as a leader without them.

BUILDING TRUST

Real teamwork revolves around shared purpose. Trust allows your team members to adopt a shared purpose. By now, you should recognize the cause-and-effect relationships involved in effective leadership behavior. Here is a brief reminder of the discussion on trust in chapter 4:

1. Connecting with people by understanding who they are and how they experience their roles builds trust.
2. Your employees will look for evidence of your personal character and technical competence to build trust.
3. You build trust by consistently being genuine and authentic, day in and day out.

People will only connect to shared purpose, engage in their work, and create high-performing teams that drive performance outcomes when they have the necessary level of trust. To create that level of trust you must learn and practice seven fundamental leader behaviors.

Attentiveness

Effective leaders are present and responsive to the needs of their team members. They give their key people their undivided attention every day. Whether using leader huddles, the old Hewlett-Packard

"leading by wandering around" approach, or rounding for outcomes, leadership connection begins by being available and genuinely attentive to the needs of the people doing the work of the organization. Do not convey, "Here I am. What do you want to tell me?" Nothing will more clearly signal a negative attitude than impatient comments directed at your team members. Isolate yourself as a leader, at any level, and you do so at your own risk and to the peril of your organization's performance.

Alertness

Effective leaders have a highly developed empathic sense. They can tell when another person is in emotional distress and respond to what they see. The most effective leaders use this ability to discern whether a team member is using their upper or lower brain.

More attitudes are communicated through facial expressions than most people realize. A person's forehead, eyes, and mouth will often reveal when their inner emotional state is in conflict with their words and behavior. Unfortunately, leaders too often dismiss the value of a person's facial expressions because they feel that the other person is "too emotional" or is challenging their authority. Failing to be alert and responsive to people's emotions is a major impediment to strategy execution.

When you are talking about controversial subjects, watch someone's eyes and mouth if you want to discern their preferences or state of mind. Be willing to change your behavior or change the words you are using if you see a negative reaction to them. Record in your mental library the words and actions that cause negative reactions so you can avoid them in the future.

Appreciation

Effective leaders are constantly looking for opportunities to praise people, and they share that praise daily. Leaders are too often

critically minded and quick to verbalize other people's faults. There is a leadership myth that it is the leader's responsibility to catch people doing things wrong, but the opposite is true—leaders should spend a great deal of time catching people doing the right things and acknowledging them for it.

Not only is it hard for some leaders to look for things to praise, but when they do see something positive, these leaders also tend to take the good for granted and fail to express their appreciation for the great work. You know how you respond to positive encouragement in your own work. Well, so do the people who work for you. Everyone enjoys receiving expressions of appreciation, regardless of their position on an organizational chart.

Expressing appreciation is good for both the giver and the receiver. Appreciation fosters a positive attitude and work ethic. Learn to be an encourager of others, express your appreciation for their good work, and watch their engagement and execution of your plan drive performance.

Thoughtfulness

Any successful leader knows that effective communication is critical to execution and peak performance. Do you make decisions independently, or do you include your team members in the decision-making process? Are you open to suggestions? Do you express thoughtfulness as a form of inclusive, participative leadership in your daily relationships with your team members?

Autocratic, independent behavior in a leader breeds contempt and, in the worst case, leads to open rebellion in the workplace. A thoughtful leader will always solicit feedback from those being most affected by a decision, especially regarding potentially far-reaching consequences not immediately apparent in a high-level overview.

Do not be surprised if it takes some time to coax your team members to provide their input and to believe that you are sincere

in seeking their opinions and ideas. It may take some time to build trust if it is currently absent, but it is worth the time and effort. When we display kindness and thoughtfulness—for example, by acts of acknowledgment and inclusion—our brains release oxytocin, a hormone that promotes social bonding, along with serotonin and dopamine, compounds that relieve pain, depression, and anxiety. This hormonal action in our brains creates a kindness feedback loop by prompting feelings of warmth, trust, safety, and belonging. Habitual thoughtfulness builds positive emotional connections between leaders and their employees—connections that are essential to execution and peak performance. This improved performance will be proof of your leadership effectiveness.

Dedication to Improvement

Success in every aspect of life is directly related to your ability and willingness to learn, adapt, and grow. Dan Sullivan and Catherine Nomura put it well in *Laws of Lifetime Growth* (2016, 2): Growth is a fundamental human need, "at the root of everything that gives us a feeling of accomplishment, satisfaction, meaning," and purpose in life. You may recall that we emphasized the need for effective leaders to commit to lifelong learning in the introduction to this book. Great relationships, by their nature, require constant tending. The quality of the care you put into relationships translates into either a positive or negative experience of your behavior in the lives of other people.

When leaders share meaningful learning experiences with their employees, the levels of employee engagement and leader support naturally go up. When employees have leaders who are invested in their success, meet their legitimate needs, and acknowledge their hard work, those employees try harder not only to meet but also to exceed technical and behavioral performance expectations. Investing in continuous learning changes the people and the organization—a constant evolution in our thoughts and actions in

response to new understanding, new knowledge, and new skills. A closed-minded, negative attitude toward continuous improvement can destroy any chance for learning, and when there is no learning, there is no growth.

Humility

There is a powerful connection between humility and leadership influence. "Only a small percentage of people are continually successful over the long run. These outstanding few recognize that every success comes through the assistance of many other people—and they are continually grateful for this support" (Sullivan and Nomura 2016). You cannot be a successful leader unless you have support from others who are willing to contribute to your success and the success of the organization. No one wins alone, regardless of their individual talent.

Jim Collins identified humility as a key leadership characteristic in *Good to Great* decades ago, and humility remains the topic of current articles (Bourke and Titus 2020). Collins and his team pointed out "the window and the mirror": the greatest leaders tend to look in the mirror to find the source of errors or mistakes when things go wrong, and to look out the window to acknowledge employees or good fortune when things go well.

As a leader, can you give up your "right" to find fault with others and accept personal accountability and responsibility for your stewardship obligation? Can you be open to receiving candid feedback about your own behavior and its impact on those you lead? Can you get excited about letting others help you learn about your own behaviors so you can improve your leadership effectiveness? Much is written these days about the lack of employee engagement, motivation, and performance. Is it possible that this perceived lack is merely a reflection of ineffective leadership? Unless you learn to lead with humility, you will not even be willing to ask the questions.

Selflessness

The highest state of human development is demonstrated when a person consistently places the needs of others ahead of their own. These rare individuals have a mindset of others before self. The leadership literature calls people who aspire to and attain this level of selflessness *servant leaders.*

A selfless servant leader focuses on other people. Effective leaders view their key role as supporting and serving their employees as they grow and learn. These leaders cultivate an atmosphere of continuous learning and encourage their employees by seeking out ideas and praising their achievements. Such leadership behavior is the key to high employee engagement, helping people feel purposeful, motivated, and energized, so they come to work to focus on and further the goals and objectives of the organization. Selfless, other-oriented behavior demonstrates that the leader is there for team members when they most need support. Are you available to your team when they need you most?

THE SECRET SAUCE OF HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS

We do not know of any organization that does not have a set of defined core values. We do find many organizations, such as Enron, where leaders did not connect their core values of integrity, communication, respect, and excellence to their core business practices. As a result, these values were merely empty platitudes hanging in decorative frames on walls throughout the organization.

There is a direct relationship between the ethical climate of an organization and the ethical behavior of leaders and their team members (Wimbush, Shepard, and Markham 1997). An organization that has designed and fostered an ethical climate and culture should be less likely to tolerate unethical and toxic behaviors by its members—leaders included. The values and behaviors of senior

leadership especially influence the culture of the organization, and ultimately the behavior performance of their team members. Leadership behavior is the major factor in the formation of high-performing teams.

A high-performing team is more than just a group of people who are required to work together. At its core, the formation of a high-performing team begins with a shared purpose and common goal. The ability to get along—the focus of most team-building exercises—is important, but it only has value when it helps people get the job done. Ultimately, the purpose of the team is to perform, produce results, and advance the goals and objectives of the organization. An effective leader's primary responsibility is to generate the team unity and shared purpose that creates engagement and produces results at the highest sustainable levels.

You can find a host of leadership resources on the common attributes that make up an engaged and high-performing team. Following are the most frequently cited elements.

- *Trust*. A high-performing team has high levels of trust among its members. They respect each other and value what each member brings to the team. They also respect and value differences in thoughts and experiences.
- *Purpose*. When team members share a common purpose, they are willing to subordinate self-interest for the sake of the team. Accordingly, this shared sense of purpose ensures the team is pulling together, staying aligned with objectives and key results, and moving in the same direction to drive performance. When there is clarity of purpose, everyone can be engaged and committed to achieving the desired results.
- *Accountability*. A high-performing team not only talks about the importance of accountability, but they also hold each other accountable to the desired business results. Accountability also prompts the team to look for continuous performance improvement opportunities. If a

process or procedure is not working, then they look for a better way.

- *Inclusivity*. A high-performing team understands that inclusion taps into the collective intelligence of a team. It allows for multiple perspectives in problem-solving and ensures that every team member has the opportunity to participate, contribute, and celebrate the overall achievements of the team. Accommodating a variety of behaviors, strengths, and preferences enriches the team's results.

- *Learning*. Even the best teams have opportunities to improve. High-performing teams actively look for those opportunities. The team members encourage feedback and use it to learn and grow, constantly striving for higher levels of performance.

- *Celebrating*. Celebrating creates positive emotional connections to the work of a high-performing team. Group celebrations and acknowledgments encourage team members to drive performance on their next project so they can win again. Nothing feeds the hunger for growth and achievement more than the experience of being a winner.

- *Communication*. High-performing teams manage confrontation and conflict in healthy ways. They have clear expectations and commit to honesty, eliminating toxic behaviors such as gossip, negativity, and office politics that obstruct performance.

- *Shared leadership*. The leader of a high-performing team is always someone who does not rely on formal authority. These leaders are willing to defer to members of the team and use collaborative, adaptive leadership practices when appropriate. The effective leader of a high-performing team always accepts full responsibility for the team's results but will delegate authority, share the problem-solving and

decision-making process, and most importantly, create opportunities for the collective talent, intellect, and skill of all team members to drive results.

High-performing teams drive the performance of an organization. They do not happen by accident. Leaders need to be intentional about creating the level of engagement that produces a high-performing team, by ensuring their own highly effective leadership behavior.

ENGAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS

We started this chapter by proposing that the primary success of leaders depends on their ability to match their behavior to unpredictable and changing situations. Context matters, and contextual variables create challenges for how a leader deploys strategy, makes decisions, manages processes, and uses their technical skills and behavior skills effectively. A leader's ability to remain flexible in their behavior no matter the situation is the key variable in promoting and sustaining employee engagement to drive performance. Leading from your upper brain means managing behavior effectively in response to the stress created by changing contexts. Doing so allows you to engage your technical skills to function at optimal levels of performance.

What you have discovered to this point is that self-awareness and self-management of behavior are the key elements of an effective leader. When you can regulate your thoughts and emotions—leading yourself with your upper brain—you develop the capacity to lead the brains of your team members to higher levels of engagement as well. Engagement then becomes the byproduct of effective leadership and organizational culture. When team members do not function as a high-performing team and display disengaged performance behaviors, thereby producing poor results, it is easy to blame the lack of resources, ineffective processes, or disruptive

contextual variables. More often than not, however, disengagement boils down to a lack of effective leadership and a toxic organizational culture. We will investigate the aspects of organizational culture and its role in creating engagement in the next chapter.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The primary success of leaders depends on their ability to match their behavior to unpredictable and changing situations.
- Any company or organization that fails to invest in the development of its people, particularly its leaders, will always underperform organizations that do.
- Personality is a poor indicator and predictor of performance.
- Your leadership obligation is to create a culture of well-being and performance excellence, where your people discover personal joy in their work and provide you, their leader, with extraordinary results.
- An organization that has designed and fostered an ethical climate and culture should be less likely to tolerate unethical and toxic behaviors by its members—leaders included.

PUT IT TO WORK

1. What's the best team-building event you have ever tried? The worst? How did the event help or hinder your team? What would your ideal team-building event look like?
2. How do you currently measure the performance of your team? Does each member of your team have a personal performance development plan that focuses

on key behavior changes to improve effectiveness and performance? Do you?

3. What core values have you and your team developed that connect you and help you maintain alignment with your primary objectives and key results?

4. Do your team members know how to support each other in achieving shared objectives and desired outcomes? Create a set of promises that each member of your team can support, describing the necessary behaviors.

5. What is the current level of trust on your team? How do you know and how would you measure it? What do you need to do to improve the level of trust on your team?

6. What level of accountability exists within your team and your organization? To assess this, consider the following questions:

   • What are the tangible and intangible costs of toxic behavior?

   • What behavioral and performance expectations or standards are in place for the team and for the organization as a whole?

   • Does anyone consistently display poor behavior that affects the functioning of the team? What have you done to confront this behavior? Has your response been effective? Why or why not?

   • How do you deal with disruptive behaviors? How do your team members handle disruptive behaviors within their own groups?

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