Leadership is not about grand gestures or personal greatness, but about detailed everyday activities – and it is available to everyone.

If I had £1 for every book or article on leadership that begins with a historical perspective and ends up citing individuals such as Winston Churchill, Napoleon or even Margaret Thatcher, I would be a rich woman. When discussing leadership, historical comparisons and notions of genetic inheritance beset us. Moreover, because of the international profile of our typical role model “leaders”, leadership as an activity seems far beyond the reach of us mere mortals. It acquires huge scale and importance – making it difficult for us to imagine how the “L” word could ever relate to the nitty-gritty of our mundane lives.

Organisations typically embark on change programmes with the aim of achieving critical performance improvement. At the heart of such change programmes, we are usually seeking changes in behaviour and in the accepted ways of doing things. And yet it is a sad truth that more than 70 per cent of change programmes fail because people cannot or do not know how to change – and it is in the area of leadership that change can prove most elusive.

Figure 1 shows the changes of leadership behaviour and style that many change programmes aspire to.

For many people in organisations, leadership is a fancy word that has very little to do with what they think they are being paid for. When supervisors and shift managers are asked to adapt their leadership style to become more empowering and enabling, it can seem as if the proposed change is almost Martian – even if people knew how to switch on those lights. After all, leadership is something that better-paid and higher-up people do, isn’t it? When senior managers and board level people are faced with the same leadership shift, the real truth is that the request can seem just as Martian to them too.

We can all mouth the right words, especially if we have been rubbing shoulders with some consultants or been to a seminar or two lately. But the reality of changing leadership style seems privately impossible. After all, how can you change your leadership style if you have never even been aware that you were a leader in the first place. Moreover, what does leadership mean in terms of the jobs that many of us are doing, day to day?
The challenge is to help people to understand what leadership on an everyday basis means. What do you do when people do not even recognise their importance as leaders? It seems to me that a helpful intervention is to turn the issue around — helping people to recognise what it is that they bring to others.

Working with a group of shift managers recently, I observed one person repeatedly offering leadership to the group. I later asked him if he had noticed how much of a leader he had been. His surprised response was “No!”. So I described what he had done:

- Summarising the discussion at key points so that others could regroup.
- Stating his own views clearly but with an openness to contributions from others.
- Imbuing the discussion with his sense of confidence and optimism in the group.
- Using humour to enable the flow of discussion from point to point.
- Talking about the challenges face-on, without “edge”.
- Persuading others to prise themselves off their “positions”.
- Never “beaming out” of the discussion but staying energised and focused on reaching a conclusion.

When he was shown his own successful leadership of his peer group, he began to see the miniature scale of everyday leadership that is precisely what many change programmes want from people in organisations. Having begun to spot and replicate those successful behaviours, he was ready to grow and develop in the direction marked “everyday leadership”. The key to his development lay, though, in observation and feedback from someone he trusted. To achieve sustained change, we need to create repeated opportunities to provide such feedback and to allow individuals the chance to practise the newly recognised skills.

It all begins by recognising that leadership does not have to be big-scale. Two recent commentators have provided useful entry points here. Daniel Goleman has received much recent publicity for his dramatic model of leadership as “emotional intelligence”. His research indicates that all successful leaders possess the five essential components (Goleman, 1998) shown in Figure 2.

Goleman (1998) is talking about human traits that are recognisable day-to-day and not connected with status or hierarchy. These are human qualities that are accessible to us all. He also demonstrates that the only way to build new behavioural habits is by creating the motivation to try out something new and then giving extended practice and feedback until the new behaviour is well and truly embedded. We can all remember learning to ride a bike with patient parents promising to hold on to the saddle as we wobbled down the road. Goleman offers us the practical possibility that leadership behaviours are available to everyone, and are not the province of the super-person.

In another refreshing approach, Kotter (1990) talks about “everyday leadership”. In his analysis of effective leaders he describes the everyday life of a leader as being about tiny actions and well thought-out snatched conversations, following a thread with people over days and months. He captures the crucial hallmark of a successful leader — the ability to create a trading environment where favours are exchanged and traded. This is leadership in miniature, leadership that seems to belong to the real world of everyday activities and occasional muddle. Kotter also shows us many of the actions that people may never have identified as belonging to the leadership school:

- Have lots of short, disjointed conversations and meetings with people where:
  1. Lots of questions are asked by the leader.
  2. Anything and everything to do with the business is up for discussion.
  3. Good humour and the “outside” often feature strongly.
  4. Instead of telling people what to do, a lot of asking, cajoling and persuading happens.

Figure 1 How leadership changes with organisational change

![Figure 1](image1)

**Figure 2 The components of emotional intelligence**

![Figure 2](image2)

1. **Self Awareness**
   The ability to recognise and understand your moods, emotions and drives, as well as their effect on others

2. **Self Regulation**
   The ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods

3. **Motivation**
   A passion to work for reasons that go beyond money or status

4. **Empathy**
   The ability to understand the emotional makeup of other people

5. **Social Skill**
   Proficiency in managing relationships and building networks

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Not “Leadership” but “leadership”

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This is learnable behaviour – provided that the would-be leaders, as Goleman (1998) explained, receive the right kind of developmental support and coaching to bridge the gap. We need to get close enough to people such that they allow access to their real responses, fears and concerns. But how do we ensure that we support the development of behaviours that are effective?

For Kotter (1990), leadership is about opportunism and the small scale. The biggest concern he foresees, therefore, is nervousness about appearing muddled and ineffective to leadership presents an apparent contradiction to what we expect leadership to be – surely real leaders are better organised than this? Surely which only they know but which anticipates “favour” and influence.

The secret is that behind the myriad short and disjointed exchanges there does exist a map of intention that the leader is following. But it is not a super-game-plan that deals in detail with all eventualities. Rather, it is a totting-up of what and who might be helpful over the short, medium and longer term. It is a fluid item, constantly under review and operating as a mental checklist against which the moment can be seized. It is, if you like, a compass and a map of the terrain, rather than a detailed route plan.

The effective leader has worked out with whom, where, when and with what he needs to work with and how best to do that – and only against that template does the series of apparently short, disjointed meetings and conversations take place. This is where the coaching comes in. The leader is helped to figure out what the template must include in terms of people, their actions and consequences, as well as the arguments that the leader must deploy to work his/her web of “favour” and influence.

In his renowned classic on coaching, Whitmore (1996) talks passionately about the need to help people find what he describes as their “inner game”. As an illustration, he uses the developments in sports coaching that have moved away from exhaustive exploration of “technique” towards the development of mind and body awareness. The individual learns to recognise the integration of his/her own natural rhythm and focus so that the best personal technique is grown from within. Once the personal technique has been learned, then other helpful externally-derived techniques can be incorporated, but only if they can sit well with the basic internal harmony that has been developed. He believes that coaching operates within the same set of principles:

- A belief that people are inherently capable but, for most, their capabilities have not yet been tapped.
- Coaching must develop superb self-awareness as well as be action-focused.
- If coaching is offered in the right way to people, and is wanted by the individual, then the power to create substantial change is present.

Coaching for the development of leadership ability needs to begin with mapping out the key actions/deliverables the leader identifies as critical to success. It then moves to identifying the people who will provide the deliverables and plan out the ways in which the leader will influence, persuade or trade to commit the people to the required deliverables. The coaching then has to examine past, present and future opportunities, big and small, which will work to support, develop or amend the leader’s plans.

This may include scanning other activities for their relationship to the plan, scrutinising conversations for their contribution, and planning follow-up discussions to take things further. It will use all forms of feedback to assist in the management of the leader’s behaviours so that the best impact can be achieved. These reviews during the coaching process need to take place on a frequent basis, until the coachee is able to internalise the approach. At that point, coaching becomes a monitoring, health-checking activity which takes place less frequently and on demand.

Building leadership capability that creates sustaining behaviour and performance is art in miniature, rather than grand landscape painting. It is about persistence and detail, as well as flexibility and favours. It is about recognising that leadership is a construction of planned and opportunistic actions and behaviours that create clarity and meaning for others – and that construction requires the close support of a coaching relationship to bring it alive.

References