

Leaders who want to transform their own performance and their team's effectiveness need to look at how their own shadow could be getting in their way. Here leadership consultant Anthony Landale, highlights what your shadow is, the way it impacts on other people and how development is crucial for leaders who want to achieve breakthrough.

Every leader casts a shadow

There was an advertisement run not so long ago for Tabasco Sauce. You may have seen it. In the advert God was shown sitting in the heavens on a cloud shaking the said sauce onto a sandwich and clearly relishing the prospect of his fiery snack. However, as he was shaking the bottle he was also quite unaware that drops of the sauce were falling onto the earth below causing complete havoc and destruction.

So it is with leaders everywhere. Leaders focus on what they see as important and are typically quite unconscious of the unintended, but massive, impact they are having on their colleagues, teams and clients. We call this unconscious impact their shadow. But why is this important?

The answer to this is that an autocratic command and control approach in business is no longer appropriate. To be successful leaders today have to find ways to engage people's ideas, energy and inspiration and this means they will also have to build much stronger relationships – and what will prevent such relationships from occurring is their shadow. Let me give you a real life example of a leader we worked with who became very aware of the impact his shadow was having on his effectiveness. Graham Cooke is Factory General Manager with Unilever Ice Cream & Frozen Food (ICFF) in Lowestoft and in his early career he achieved results by being a capable, forceful and task-orientated manager. There was nothing unusual about this but he had developed something of a reputation in the business and when he took up a new role to drive through a large IT change project he discovered that his new team were extremely concerned about how he might manage them.

Graham Cooke recognised that he needed to change and the work with him started by focusing on his shadow – helping him to become more aware of the impact he was having on others and helping him to see that he had different choices based on the future that he wanted to create for himself, his team and the company.

This understanding - that a greater awareness of the impact we make leads to a clearer choice around what future we want to create - is a critical one for leaders to grasp. We may think that we have choice all the time but most of us are, in fact, governed by judgement. We are always assessing what is right or wrong, good or bad. We base decisions not on what we want to create in the future but on what we have learned through experience in the past. But if we want to change there has to be a radical interruption to this 'normal' way of looking and responding. This interruption starts with a deep self-enquiry into how we impact on others at the moment and whether our intended impact is the same as that experienced by our colleagues.

To give you another example of how this principle plays out in real life let us consider the case of the leader who is perceived by his or her team as being too gentle or soft. The leader may believe that their style is one that helps to empower staff but the shadow of such a leadership style may impact the team profoundly. In such cases people in the team will often start to go 'off message' - doing their own thing in their own way. There

may also be a continual sense of crisis in the team caused by a leadership that isn't clear enough or engaging enough.

The point here is that it isn't only strong leaders who cast a shadow. All leaders do. We may have a particular leadership style but our shadow will affect others and when we are unaware of it, it can seriously compromise both our people's engagement at work and business effectiveness.

One final example of the shadow in action underlines the problems that can be caused. Take the case of the Managing Director whose team reported regularly that sales and results were in line with projections. Then, just two months before the end of year, the sales team reported that they were in fact running over £500,000 behind target.

The MD exploded. How could this happen? Why hadn't he been told earlier? What were all the meetings about? The answer he got was that people were afraid to tell him about the real state of affairs because of his temper.

In this real life example the MD saw in that moment that his shadow had led his people to present him with key information in such a way that he wouldn't have reason to blow up. Unfortunately their approach had exacerbated the situation. He would have needed the information much earlier in the year in order to do something about it - but the weakness of his relationships with his key people had let him down. And these relationships were his responsibility.

So, if you are a leader, how do you start to tackle your shadow?

Your lever is this - to build fierce self-awareness of the way you behave around people. This requires you to get information about your impact on others and you can use coaching, 360-degree questionnaires or structures like Action Learning Groups to begin to get such feedback.

However you can make this even more real, right now, by looking at people with whom you do not have a strong relationship. Take a moment to think of your manager, or your manager's boss, when you are about to present important information about your team, department or performance. What spin do you put on that information? How does your attitude and behaviour differ in a meeting where your boss is present and in a meeting where s/he isn't present? Do you feel you need to look after that relationship?

And now recognise that you have that same impact on the people who report directly to you. Some of your colleagues – those with whom you have strong relationships – may feel energised and inspired by your leadership. But don't kid yourself. There will be others who feel drained, demotivated or even intimidated by you. Where this is the case you have an extraordinary opportunity for growth.

So how aware are you of your shadow? It is absolutely up to you to decide whether you want to look at it or not. But if you are prepared to continue leading, unaware of its impact, then don't be surprised when you achieve results that you don't intend.

Alternatively take your courage in your hand, adopt ways that help you to see the shadow that you cast and start to make different choices about the impact you want to have in the world.

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