LeadershipTrust

The Leadership Trust Foundation
Think Tank Report
Executive Summary

"What is the real value and contribution of *leadership* to business and society, and how can we measure the impact and contribution of *leadership development interventions*?"

Summary

Leadership is inextricably linked to business and society. Without responsible leadership we will have a moral vacuum in business and society, and without stewardship we will be unable to address the imminent challenges that threaten our society and sustainability of resource. If we cannot break our attachment to the idea of the heroic leader, we are destined to experience the continuous failure of leaders to live up to the pedestals that society has built for them – and the inevitable breaches of trust, uncertainty, and upheaval that follow such disappointment.

We are all aware of the impact that high profile cases of poor 'leadership' have had on society, but the importance of businesses in stimulating the economy and creating jobs is greater than ever. Our belief is that a drive for more effective leadership will enable businesses to have a much greater positive impact on society, and reduce the cases of poor and unethical leadership.

With the collaboration of business schools and leadership developers such as the Think Tank hosted at The Leadership Trust Foundation, we can work to reform our notions of leadership, and build this new thinking into new leadership practice. We believe that such a new form of leadership education and development can support organisations to develop dispersed leadership across the organisation; a leadership process that fosters vision, disruption, change, responsibility, and action for change, and that will enable shared meaning, leadership calling and vision to emerge. When this happens, the real value and contribution of leadership for business and society will become much more visible, and the supporting role of education and leadership development will become much more self-evident.

Background

At the first annual Leadership Think Tank hosted by The Leadership Trust Foundation and attended by a group of Leadership Trust Fellows and external colleagues, we set out to discuss two important leadership-related questions:

- What is the real value and contribution of *leadership* to business and society?

- In the light of this, how can we measure the impact and contribution of *leadership development interventions* to business and society?

The relationship between business and society should, we believe, be the key concern of leadership, but too often it is not. Our Think Tank reflected on what does, and would, leadership look like if it were able to shape our society for 'good'?

The meeting format consisted of a series of facilitated round table discussions focusing on each of the key questions. Seventeen participants attended the two-day event. The following is an executive summary of the report's findings:

i.   **Leadership plays a key role in building an ethical society**
Leadership today *must*, at least in part, be about leading society, and not only about the production of wealth for shareholders. The many crises of the last decade have taught us that.

ii.   **Leadership as a shaper of vision and driver of positive change**
The societal role of leadership is to produce and communicate a vision for an ideal future, at the same time as showing a realistic grasp of what can be accomplished. Good leaders create positive change. Creating and sustaining vision is a key element in this process.

iii. **Leadership as a role model for society**
If we removed leadership from society one outcome, we believe, would be the loss of the critical role models needed to build ethical communities and organisations.

iv.   **Meaning creation and leadership as 'calling'**
Meaning creation is an important element of the leadership of business and society, supporting the quest for a sense of purpose and meaning by the individuals within an organisation, community or society. Creating a sense of community that draws together people who hold diverse perspectives can be seen as a key element in this meaning-making and sense-making leadership process.

v.   **Dispersed leadership as a critical element in understanding the leadership of organisations**
Leadership is considered to be a major determinant of organisational culture, and the shaping of culture falls under the aegis of leadership. Great organisations build resilient cultures in which leadership operates at all levels of the organisation.

vi.   **Disruptive leadership can be important to bring about change**
Disruptive leadership occurs at all levels of an organisation or society. It is a critical activity for change, a quiet but powerful form of leadership that disrupts the status quo and thus produces change and innovation, and is often driven by strongly held values and principles.

vii. **Stewardship and building a legacy through teaching is key to today's ethical leadership**
Stewardship can, and should, still have meaning for leaders today, as stewardship is concerned about the world that we bequeath to our children and grandchildren. Without considering the stewardship role of leaders for society, leaders will be bound to make short-term decisions and take actions that neglect the sustainability of their organisations and ultimately society's and the planet's resources.

viii. **The inevitable disappointment of heroic leadership**
Our society has tended to put great leaders on a pedestal. But all leaders, however good, have the failings of ordinary people, and some of the greatest leaders are also flawed as human beings, thus inevitably disappointing those who put them on a pedestal.

ix.   **Leadership of and for Generation Y**
Generation Y appears not to want to take on leadership roles in the way that the previous generation has conceived them. The next generation appears to be rejecting the old model of top down (often authoritarian) leadership. They are happy to become involved, but reject the leadership roles played by their predecessors.

x.   **Higher education and the contribution of business schools to the leadership of society**
We recognise that the power to change society through leadership lies in large measure with today's undergraduates and young people who will go out into the wider world (and hopefully the labour force) in the next few years. The motivations, passions, dreams and concerns of this generation will drive the business agendas of the next generation and, therefore, the leadership role models and ideas that they encounter now are vital.

xi. **Measuring change at individual, team and organisational levels after leadership development interventions is not always quantifiable.**
We prefer the aspiration of 'capturing' changes and identifying impact – sometimes this impact can be quantifiable, but not always.

xii. **At the level of a work-based team we see great benefit in facilitating the team to progress a genuine challenge within a leadership programme.**
At The Leadership Trust Foundation we often build such activities into the design of many of our programmes, as organisations can then immediately recognise the tangible benefits that accrue.

Conclusions

i. Not only are business and society changing more rapidly than at any other period, but *the understanding and practice of leadership is not changing quickly enough* to reflect these shifts.

ii. *Our leadership challenges have become more global, networked, shifting and urgent than ever before*, but our notions of leadership have not kept pace. New thinking has not found its way into the leadership education and leadership development curricula. Leadership has, therefore, been increasingly unable to address today's challenges, whether at the level of the business enterprise or at the level of the sustainability of resource.

iii. In order for leadership to begin to address today's critical problems, *the idea of leadership portrayed in business schools and wider society must move urgently away from an individualised concept* of the hero figure who offers himself (usually a him) as saviour, followed by inevitable disappointment and failure.

iv. A new understanding and practice of *leadership as a distributed, connected process that operates systemically within organisations and across society* is now urgently needed. Only such a holistic view of leadership that gives a voice to those previously disenfranchised, and builds dispersed leadership capability across organisations and society will be equipped to address the fast-moving global challenges that we have discussed.

v. Leadership must move away from its narrow emphasis on profit and wealth-creation, and from its focus on hierarchy and authority - toward an ethical and networked leadership *that takes responsibility for the actions of business and society and for the long- term sustainability of resource* – such leadership is built on stewardship, listening, reflection, meaning-making, sense-making, envisioning the future and taking action for social change and justice – disruptive leadership.

vi. Our success measures for leadership development must also shift towards assessing the actions that leaders take within business and society *in the pursuit of bringing about change for good in society and business.*

vii. We have identified the need for *leaders today to become stewards for their organisations, business, society*, and ultimately for the planet, and to take up the role of teacher in order to develop successors who are ready early for responsible leadership.

viii. In the future, we see leadership development success measures shifting to reflect the important leadership roles that we have identified, and *measuring the development of more connected, more dispersed and more ethical leadership in organisations* that provides meaning, vision, change and stewardship for today's challenges as well as preparing future generations. Such leadership will address critical societal problems by leading and connecting outwards across cultures as well as focusing inwards.