Leadership Dyads: Playing to Your Strengths

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At an IMD Discovery Event in September 2011, more than 40 participants gathered to discover what makes a successful leadership dyad and how to improve interaction, synergy and effectiveness in their own dyad. Having completed an online questionnaire prior to the session, the participants, in their leadership pairs, received customized feedback and guidance from personal coaches with the aim of improving their dyad health.

Discovery Events are exclusively available to members of IMD's Corporate Learning Network. To find out more, go to www.imd.org/cln.

In a symphony orchestra, the first violin plays the melody and the second violin plays the harmony. While the roles are very different, they complement one other and together produce beautiful music. In a company, the first violin can be compared to the leader and the second violin to the deputy. There should be good communication between them and complementarity even though they are doing different things. The leadership dyad can create a unique situation in which two people can combine their efforts to lead in a unique way, achieving results that surpass what could be achieved individually by either member. Depending on an individual's personality, there is a natural propensity to lead in a certain way, but combining different styles can enhance the overall leadership effectiveness. However, leadership dyads need to play to their strengths and develop the skills needed to leverage individual differences for synergy.

In your leadership/management role, is there a first and a second violin? Does your leadership dyad manifest complementarity? Have you achieved synergy through complementarity or, on the contrary, do you find interaction difficult within your leadership dyad? Below, we look at one particular leadership dyad, and the destructive effect that lack of trust played in breaking down communications. Once awareness had been created, however, the dyad was able to see how they needed to work on re-establishing trust and making a proactive effort to ensure communication channels were open.

John and Stefan: A lack of trust[1]

John was Stefan's second violin in the marketing department of a multinational consumer goods company based in Geneva. John had worked for the company for many years in offices around the world. Stefan was a newcomer, having joined the company just a year earlier. Both completed the NEO PI-R, a personality indicator instrument, which describes human personality along five facets – emotionality, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness – which are each made up of six sub-dimensions.

John and Stefan's NEO profiles were very similar on most dimensions, but diverged on a few key dimensions. During the review discussion with both participants, it became apparent that their similar personality profiles masked a deep tension in the relationship. Both scored within the average range of most dimensions of emotionality (response to negative emotions such as worry, anger and stress). In terms of extraversion (i.e. degree to which energy is derived from others), they were similar in their degree of outgoingness (i.e. sociability), as well as warmth (i.e. degree of affection). But John scored high on assertiveness compared with Stefan's average score, suggesting that John had a more dominant personality. They both scored on the low side of candor – suggesting they were both quite guarded in the kinds of information divulged – and were both highly competitive. Finally, on the conscientiousness facet (which measures the degree of structure in approaching work), Stefan scored very high on need to achieve – and he confirmed his intense drive regarding his career during the session – compared with John average's score, reflecting his greater emphasis on work–life balance.

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[1] This is a disguised example.

During the review discussion, John took charge of the discussion at the first opportunity (consistent with his high level of assertiveness) to express how unhappy he was with Stefan as his manager. John described how he had felt unsupported and even betrayed in certain instances when Stefan had failed to support him or the team on highly visible occasions. His perception was that Stefan was being political, choosing his own career over the team, and John was deeply resentful as a result. Stefan denied this, and didn't remember the event that John was describing and questioned the importance John attributed to the events, in the process discounting John's right to his emotions.

Over the course of the discussion, as John increasingly opened up and expressed his emotions, Stefan became more and more closed, talking little and making little eye contact. This undermined John's sense of psychological safety, leading him to say, "I don't know what's going to happen after this," implying he was fearful of the repercussions his disclosure would have on his relationship with Stefan and on his career. The coach asked Stefan to respond to John, and to clarify whether John's concern was valid. After some discussion around how Stefan's lack of openness could have been interpreted as being unsupportive, Stefan agreed to be more direct and forthcoming with Stefan in terms of relaying key organizational information. He was able to allay John's concerns and they then agreed to work together on their relationship, as well as the dynamic in the team, by engaging in social activities designed to build psychological safety.

A disaster caused by Lack of Psychological Safety

In 2003, the Space Shuttle Columbia disintegrated during re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere. Investigations showed that the disaster was caused by a piece of foam insulation that had broken away and struck the left wing during launch.

It was later revealed that some of the NASA engineers had suspected the damage when the Space Shuttle was still in orbit. One engineer, Rodney Rocha, had requested additional imaging to gauge the damage and work out possible solutions. When the request was refused by Linda Ham, the head of the Mission Management Team, Rocha drafted an angry e-mail "… this is the wrong (and bordering on irresponsible) answer… I must emphasize (again) that severe enough damage … could present potentially grave hazards." Unfortunately, however, he decided against sending the e-mail and did not speak up during a subsequent meeting because "… I was too low down here in the organization, and she's way up there…"

Self-awareness and interpersonal relationships

Lack of self-awareness is a fatal flaw: "Only shallow people know themselves well." – Oscar Wilde

The fatal flaw of individuals, as well as leaders, is a lack of self-awareness. In the case of a leadership dyad, it is important not only to know yourself but also to understand the similarities and differences of your dyad partner – or, how complementary you are. In the case of John and Stefan, this means understanding the differences in terms of dominance, candor and need to achieve.

Personality is an important factor in a leader/manager dyad. Is personality inherited (nature) or acquired (nurture)? Or does it come from a combination of genetic make-up and our environment, which interact to determine our behavior? The five-factor model of personality – "the Big Five" – describes human personality along five facets – emotionality, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness – each of which has sub-dimensions. The NEO PI-R is one of the personality indicator instruments that uses the Big Five model.

- **Emotionality (Need for stability):** The need for stability is the propensity to experience and understand negative emotion – such as anger, stress and worry. People with a higher degree of emotionality tend to be more reactive than those on the low side, who are generally more resilient.

- **Extraversion**: Extraversion describes the degree to which people derive energy from social contacts. The dimensions measure the degree to which a personality is characterized by warmth, sociability, dominance, activity level, risk-taking and cheerfulness.

- **Openness**: This dimension measures an individual's interest in exploring ideas and new experiences. People scoring lower tend to be more down to earth, data-driven, and detail-oriented than people on the high side, who are imaginative, conceptual and big-picture thinkers.

- **Agreeableness**: Agreeableness is the degree to which we place other people's interests above our own. This dimension looks at the degree of trust, candor, consideration vs. self-interest, competitiveness, modesty and sympathy that characterizes people's personality. While people on the high side tend to be more liked by other people, they may tend to neglect their own interests in favor of others'.

- **Conscientiousness**: This dimension looks at how structured people are in their approach to work – including sense of competence, orderliness, reliability, achievement-orientation, self-discipline and deliberateness. People on the high side tend to be driven, focused perfectionists – often workaholics. People on the low side are often more relaxed and flexible but sometimes disorganized and inefficient.

Complementarity

An effective complementary dyad requires common ground rules, a shared commitment to a common vision and strategy, and the alignment of incentives. In addition, both parties should be able to match the deeper commitment with denser communication and be prepared to share the spotlight. However, too much focus on similarity will encourage the formation of "ingroups" and "outgroups" in a team.

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Ingroups vs. Outgroups

In social psychology, the creation of "ingroups" and "outgroups" is a very common process in a team. Similarities such as family, race, gender or religion are among the reasons people may feel closer to one person than to another. People form ingroups with "similar" people, in which they experience a sense of belonging. In contrast, they have a tendency to reject or disdain the people who are in the outgroup because they consider them to be "different." Psychologists have found that people tend to show a preferential attitude to ingroup members, which is known as "ingroup bias." This does not facilitate healthy team building because ingroup members perceive the performance of ingroups and outgroups with subjective bias.

	Performance	
	High	Low
Ingroup	Internal attribution	External attribution
Outgroup	External attribution	Internal Attribution

When high team performance is manifested, each group tends to take all the credit whereas in the case of low team performance, each looks to escape the responsibility.

A leader's role is to bring people from the outgroup to the ingroup and ultimately create a single solid team by recognizing and transforming the differences of the outgroup into complementarities. In fact, it is important for a team to comprise different people with different opinions to avoid group thinking. It is even more essential in a healthy leadership dyad.

Even when the pair in the leadership dyad have similar personalities, a few key differences can lead to very different perceptions and interpretations of behavior and events. This can bring about a breakdown in trust and communication, as demonstrated by the case above.

A good leadership dyad greatly depends on the complementarity of the first- and second-in-command.

This can manifest itself in different ways, for example:

- Task (e.g. managing external vs. internal environment)

- Expertise (e.g. finance vs. marketing)

- Cognitive (e.g. big picture thinking vs. attention to details)

- Role (e.g. "good guy" vs. "bad guy").

A famous example of a successful leadership dyad is Apple's former CEO Steve Jobs and COO Tim Cook. They complemented each other in both a cognitive sense – big picture thinking (Steve Jobs) vs. attention to detail (Tim Cook), and in terms of task assignment – managing the external environment (Steve Jobs) vs. the internal environment (Tim Cook).

Building trust is essential to ensure the leadership dyad benefits from the complementarity. Trust, or more precisely, a high degree of psychological safety in the dyad, will facilitate mutual feedback and understanding, which is essential to establishing a high-performing dyad.

The higher the level of disclosure between dyad members, the closer they both feel. Psychological safety refers to the willingness to reveal your vulnerability in front of the other person.

This personal trust is the pre-requisite necessary to take the relationship from management up to the level of leadership. While management is limited to a formal working relationship, leadership requires that a certain level of trust be in place.

Conclusion

Complementarity in a leadership dyad can create synergy that is instrumental to achieving high performance. Trust is vital in order to fully benefit from the complementarity in the dyad. Disclosure is key in order to build trust, while regular communication – including giving feedback – is an essential basis for maintaining the trust. In some cases, the NEO PI-R (or other instruments based on the Big Five Personality Model) can serve to provide a dyad health-check, allowing an in-depth analysis and visual presentation of the dyad's fit. It can also lead to a discussion on how the relative strengths and weaknesses of each can be best leveraged in analyzing the dyad's decision making process, roles and task separation.

A well-functioning, complementary and synergistic leadership dyad can help companies to achieve great results, it is also something that needs to be addressed if there is a dramatic organizational change, for example if one member of the dyad is promoted. Apple's former CEO and COO may have made up the perfect dyad, but with the departure of the late Steve Jobs, will Tim Cook continue to be as successful as he was before?

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Reference:
Stephen A. Miles and Michael D. Watkins, Leadership Team: Complementary Strengths or Conflicting Agendas? *Harvard Business Review*, April 2007.