



Exceeding Expectation: the principles of outstanding leadership

Briefing Note

January 2010

Why is this research important now?

We are in the midst of the worst recession the world has seen since the 1930s. The need to engage people and achieve higher performance has arguably never been greater. At the same time, the survival instinct in organisations is to move towards a more cautious, bureaucratic, cost cutting, controlling environment. The imperative of 'doing more with less' usually transpires into 'business as usual' but with less resources. This goes against the grain of everything our research suggests outstanding leaders do. Now is the time for leaders to lift the spirits of those they lead, engage them in the purpose of the organisation and help them see the fundamental role they play in that. Involve them in carving a better future for the organisation and see the benefits of long-term strategies and sustainable performance rather than a desire for instant gratification. Seek ideas from others, and allow people to work creatively, not excessively, to achieve more with less. Make and encourage deeper connections between people, solidify teams around the service it provides to its communities, and allow the power of the collective to produce more than a group of independent individuals. People are the key to performance and leaders who understand this will have a totally different approach to leading through difficult times.

What's different about this research?

Partly the difference is the method: Leadership models tend to be conceptually derived and there are very few theories of leadership that emerge from empirical research. The Work Foundation sought to resolve this omission through a major qualitative study centred on what leaders themselves believe leadership to be and how they practice it, and which included the perspective of direct reports and very senior leaders in six major organisations.

Qualitative research has the major advantage of enabling deep and detailed engagement with the issues. We wanted to get beneath the skin of leadership, to understand the world of leadership from the perspectives of those who practice it and therefore we explored both leadership philosophy (or 'leadership being') and the practice of it (leadership 'doing').

The most striking thing that makes this research different is that we have uncovered clear differences between good and outstanding leadership. The differences may be what you intuitively expect (or not), the fact is there is now evidence to support a systemic, people-centred approach to high performance leadership. This is a paradigm shift for most leaders.

This is not another model, not a set of behaviours or competencies but a detailed understanding of a different way of conceiving of leadership. We believe there are new and important findings and messages that have been uncovered in this study.

What is counterintuitive about the findings?

Where the research findings diverge from common thought is that outstanding leaders are shown to prioritise people over performance. That is not to say that performance is not important to outstanding leaders; on the contrary, they recognise their duty in propelling the organisation on to greater success. The key difference is that they appreciate it is only through their people that this will be achieved. And their people will only achieve greater performance if they are emotionally engaged with the purpose and stretched and supported to fulfil more than they believe they are capable of. Thus the starting point is always with the people.

This has implications on how organisations manage performance. Traditional models suggest that an equal focus on task and people, with steady improvement in both areas, will see individuals move up the performance scale. Our research suggests that a steady improvement in task and a disproportionate focus on people may be the route to outstanding leadership. It provokes questions about who you might recruit into the organisation or select for high potential pools. At what point in a person's career would you start investing in their leadership development? How much emphasis should you place on leadership behaviour when evaluating someone's performance?

There is a significant focus in leadership literature and in development programmes about authenticity. We found that authenticity is a trait of outstanding leaders but their authentic self is different from good leaders' authentic self. Outstanding leaders are authentic to their best self, not to their current mood. They prioritise leadership first, their own needs second.

Outstanding leaders wear only one hat: It is common for leadership consultants and books to emphasise the difference between managing and leading. We found that while leaders are well versed in articulating the differences, in practice leaders manage while leading and lead while managing.

Why did you select those sponsor organisations?

The organisations who participated in this research are significant players in their sector and represented a broad definition of high performance ie financial performance, market leaders, long standing players, come back from difficulties. This is positive as a narrow focus often results in organisations that then fail. Within each of these large, successful organisations, there would be examples of outstanding leadership which we could draw on and learn from. The sponsors supported this programme because they recognised the need to establish clear links between leadership and performance and in doing so recommended some of their very best leaders for us to speak to.

Aren't there enough theories on leadership?

We agree that there is an abundance of theories and books on leadership out there which can lead to confusion about how best to inspire high performance leadership. What our research offers is a spotlight on the core areas organisations can focus on to develop outstanding leadership. We hope that our findings provide a paradigm shift for leaders, away from details of behaviour towards a broader re-conceptualisation of leadership belief.

In addition we will be putting our theory to the test. We are beginning a leadership programme designed around the research findings which aims to discover whether outstanding leadership can be developed and what impact it has on performance. We will track the leadership journey participants go on during this time. We will also investigate the impact of this shift on their team and wider context. The programme will translate theory into practice, using the features of outstanding leadership to help individuals develop action plans and behaviours that meet personal objectives and organisational challenges.

For The Work Foundation becoming a leader is a journey not an endpoint. This research offers a way to get beyond good, solid, reliable performance to performance that exceeds expectations. We recognise that organisations want to continually up their game and this research can give illuminating insights into how to make that a reality.

Isn't the research too idealistic?

This research was founded on identifying and understanding the attributes of outstanding leaders – leaders who help achieve excellence in organisations. They think and behave differently. That is not say that all outstanding leaders do equally well on all 9 of our themes, they are not perfect but they acknowledge their weaknesses and respond to compensate for them in some way. Neither does it mean that good leaders perform badly but that there were consistent differences across the populations. We do not believe excellence is idealistic. We suggest that by understanding and developing these principles good leaders could become outstanding.

What makes this research credible?

The Work Foundation is the leading independent authority on work and its future. We aim to improve the quality of working life and the effectiveness of organisations by equipping leaders, policymakers and opinion-formers with evidence, advice, new thinking and networks. Therefore, when conducting this research our agenda was simply to uncover the route to outstanding leadership for our times in order to help organisations lift their performance and employee experience.

We did not set out with any preconceived ideas about what would constitute outstanding leadership. We favoured a grounded theory approach that meant evidence would emerge throughout the process, rather than attempting to prove or disprove a hypothesis on outstanding leadership. We were, therefore, unconstrained by our methodology and open to whatever our sample had to say.

We conducted over 250 interviews producing 200-300 hours of semi-structured data. We used an analysis software tool coupled with peer review to conduct a content analysis to explore and understand the data and ultimately reach our conclusions about outstanding leaders. The sample of leaders was sufficient in reaching a level of qualitative saturation and thus we are confident in the reliability of our findings.

What performance data did you use?

Leaders who participated in the research had to be recommended to us as a good or better leader by their organisation. To prevent bias we did not ask for further details until all our interviews had been conducted and coded. We then used performance data where it was available, to make fine comparisons between good and outstanding philosophy and practice.

We also verified the performance data we received from an organisation perspective with the feedback we heard from line managers and direct reports. When it came to the outstanding leaders, the direct reports strongly supported the organisation's view. For leaders in the good and better than good categories, the direct report response was more varied, sometimes giving greater praise, sometimes less. This enabled us to conclude that where an organisation had rated their leaders as outstanding, this was verified by those who experienced their leadership first hand. Outstanding leaders really must be doing something right to meet the organisational objectives in a way that had a positive impact on those they were leading.

How can the research help organisations?

Awareness → Understanding → Action → Performance

1. Be made aware of the research and the nine key themes of outstanding leadership;
2. Understand the research – The Work Foundation is holding workshops to help companies and individuals understand what this means for them specifically;
3. Take action – this research is the start not the end. Reading the document alone will help companies but is not going to create the change. The Work Foundation offers a number of ways of applying the research findings in organisations:
 - We have designed a leadership development programme based on these research findings which will be evaluated for a shift in leadership and performance (last few places available);
 - We are working with organisations to map their current talent and development processes onto the research findings and see how they might identify, support and develop outstanding leadership;
 - We can use the findings to create bespoke interventions tailored to specific organisation's needs;
4. See changes in organisational performance.

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