

Shifting leadership gears

Leadership is not a constant. The way people lead often needs to adapt to new purposes and contexts as organisations progress on their change journeys. You don't get far if you're in the wrong gear ...leaders need to know when to shift and lead differently.

We recently worked with a global client who has been laying the foundations for a significant shift in their strategic ambitions and in their way of doing things. In the early stages of the change, the CEO was the main catalyst, setting out the shift in direction and structure of the organisation, including recruitment of an entirely new Executive Team, and building and cementing broad agreement to the change with key stakeholders, including the Board.

The CEO, together with his new Executive Team, then did a great deal to create and build clarity around their stretching strategic ambitions, and develop some new structures to enable the organisation to achieve them. Throughout this work, various members of the wider organisation had been involved. To get real traction, they needed a global organisation where people could operate flexibly, innovatively and commercially within a clearly set framework of "hard rules", particularly around governance.

From our research, we knew that the single biggest contributor to successful change is the way people lead. We worked with the executive team, who looked first at their current way of leading (within the executive and with their own teams). It became clear that they were currently operating as the primary catalysts for the change – setting the direction, outlining tasks and managing implementation – meaning they were adopting a "directive" approach to change, as well as using a leadership approach of "shaping". It was also clear that these approaches would no longer work in creating the type of culture that was needed to move forward.

Instead, there was a need to adopt a more "masterful" approach to change, which involved a) establishing agreed frameworks for people to help identify and develop agreed solutions, and b) a leadership approach of "framing", where guiding principles and non-negotiables were set within an overarching direction, for people to then operate in a more self-governing manner.

A meeting with a wider leadership group was held to test these ideas, which we supported, and there was strong and vocal recognition of the need for these shifts – a number of the group volunteered to help develop the framework of guiding principles and non-negotiables. We helped create a fairly "loose" structure and agenda for physical & virtual meetings – which took place over a period of 4 days, and which culminated in a working document which could then be used and tested more widely.

The executive team really worked to apply their learnings and lead differently. At the beginning of the week there was some trepidation amongst them – they acknowledged that this new way of working felt quite risky and unstructured for them – but they decided they would go forward and try it. The week was a success, both in terms of output, but also in the way that they were able to lead differently – to shift gears.