Data-driven ›››

The Skills and Attributes of Today's Leader

Insights

Maria DalMolin and Maggie Shibley

Historically, the role of the leader has been results-focused, and "leadership" was largely a top-down, directive operation. And, although measurable success will always be a key metric, the scope and significance of the leader's role today has expanded exponentially and continues to evolve with increasing complexity.

Employee priorities and expectations reflect the "now normal," everyday work experience. Employees are driven by personal motivations and want to feel fulfilled, inspired and valued in their role. They seek authentic and personal connections to their manager and their teams, both of whom play a critical role

in shaping the employee experience. In addition, the normalization of remote work has provided a global talent pool with leaders managing diverse remote or hybrid teams across different time zones and cultures.

These factors are just some of many dynamic variables that the leaders of today and tomorrow need to navigate on a daily basis. At The Center for Leadership Studies, we have studied the attributes and tendencies of leaders for 50 years through our self and multirater LEAD (Leadership Effectiveness and Adaptability Description) assessments, ongoing thought leadership research

and publications. Although the work experience continues to change, we know that the foundational skills and characteristics that define effective leaders remain consistent. These skills and characteristics can be attributed to the four core leadership competencies of Situational Leadership®: Diagnose, Adapt, Communicate, Advance.

The Four Competencies ›››

There are several essential leadership skills, attributes and behaviors embedded

in these foundational constructs, including the leader's demonstrated ability to inspire, build trust, set goals, communicate, coach, select, engage and retain talent, build resilient teams and lead through change. The four competencies enable leaders to recognize and address an individual's performance needs at the task level — not a general assessment of the person overall — to promote more equitable and transformative interventions. These skill-based competencies can be purposefully developed and honed throughout a leader's journey toward more effective, intentional leadership practices.

Diagnose ›››

In the context of our framework, the term "diagnose" refers to one's ability to be thoughtful and intentional about understanding the situation you are trying to influence. This competency is increasingly vital when leading dispersed and hybrid work groups for which clarity is critical. Being able to accurately diagnose a situation helps managers lead through ambiguity and complexity by establishing clarity and alignment on an individual's performance needs and expectations.

One way to practice this competency is by asking diagnostic questions that help the leader assess the individual's ability and willingness for a task. The information the leader gathers should shape the approach they take to meet the needs of the situation. An accurate and objective diagnosis on a task-by-task basis promotes alignment on the individual's needs for a task. This is not their assessment of their performance as a person, but simply an assessment of their performance on the specific task.

Alignment on the task and performance needs of an individual promotes a shared understanding of expectations and supports meaningful goal setting.

The foundational skills and characteristics that define effective leaders remain **consistent**.

Adapt ›››

The adapt competency focuses on the leader's ability to determine the approach that best meets the needs of the individual and the situation. A leader's approach can vary greatly depending on what they diagnosed the individual's ability and willingness for the specific task to be, and may involve directive, participative or empowering behaviors.

Each of us has natural leadership strengths and areas for self-development. Some of us possess the innate ability to provide specific directions and closely supervise, but struggle with letting go of decision-making authority to empower or delegate. Conversely, others can be naturally collaborative or participative, but struggle to provide guidance or redirect the efforts of employees who are clearly struggling. However, regardless of the leader's comfort level, they need to be able to use the approach that matches the individual's performance needs to avoid overleading and underleading.

Leaders who aspire to improve recognize their natural strengths, as well as their areas for self-development. In that regard, "improving" is typically a function of increased awareness. With that objective in mind, Dr. Paul Hersey, creator of Situational Leadership®, developed the LEAD Summary Profile. LEAD is a 12-item assessment that provides feedback on a leader's innate strengths, developmental areas and leadership style adaptability.

The LEAD Self provides an individual's self-assessment of their leadership skills, whereas LEAD Other evaluates 360-assessment feedback from the leader's direct reports. The information presented in the LEAD Other provides compelling insight into how others perceive the leader's current influence-related strengths, as well as the most common mismatch scenarios on which to focus for development.

LEAD Other Data Insights ›››

To gain perspective on how leaders were adapting to meet the needs of their employees during the COVID-19 pandemic and into the "now normal," we evaluated our LEAD Other multirater results for 66,991 leaders between March 1, 2020 to May 31, 2022. During this two-year period of disruption and uncertainty, the data indicates the following trends:

- Leaders responded with styles S3 and S2 most frequently. The commonality between these two approaches is that both styles are high in relationship behavior (two-way dialogue, giving support, active listening). S3 is a high-relationship/low-task approach described as participating, encouraging, problem-solving or facilitating. S2 is a high-task/high-relationship style described as selling, explaining, persuading or coaching.

- Leaders demonstrated adaptability across the four leadership styles. Although there was a slight increase in S3 as compared to pre-COVID, it wasn't a pendulum swing to overcompensate for fear and anxiety during disruptive change.

- This data also reveals that, during times of change and disruption, people need varying combinations of task and relationship behaviors. Each individual reacts to change differently, and leaders need to be able to flex different leadership behaviors in the

moment throughout the days, weeks and months to fit the evolving needs of those they influence.

Communicate ▸▸▸

The communicate competency involves a leader interacting with others in a way they can understand and accept. Effective communication is, ultimately, determined by others. There is often a discrepancy between what the leader says and what people hear. This discrepancy can be explained by a variety of factors, including tone, body language, the communication medium and more. However, the determining factor of successful communication is the impact it has on the performer — not the intent of the leader. This requires leaders to be flexible enough to stretch and lean into the leadership style behaviors that are less comfortable and instinctive when it is what the team member needs.

Remote and hybrid work environments present innate barriers to communication and connection that require a heightened level of self-awareness, authenticity and empathy. Different time zones, reliance on video conferences, chat- and text-based communication and booked calendars can lead to miscommunication, misplaced assumptions and performance anxiety. To combat this and the additional challenges of the busy, modern workplace, leaders should engage in intentional, frequent communication that builds trust and employee engagement. Making the time to engage with team members one-on-one sends a vital message: You care. You are invested in, and committed to, helping them be successful and fulfilled in their role.

Effective communication involves embracing and encouraging the unique perspectives, experiences and contributions of a diverse team. Fully engaging in and appreciating the time you share with each member of your team can be the pivotal point between "The Great Retention," and "The Great Resignation."

Advance ▸▸▸

Utilizing the advance competency means consistently meeting people where they are as opposed to where they used to be or have the potential to be. This is a vital leadership skill because nothing stays the same. Things are either getting better, resulting in development or they are getting worse, resulting in regression. These changes are even more difficult to monitor within remote teams and at the speed of the current work environment.

Leadership is about **others**.

Effective leaders are continually managing change by either accelerating an individual's development for a task or preventing their task performance from regressing. It's important for a leader to recognize that any progress made will be iterative. There will be unpredictable, inevitable setbacks. Treating them as natural, teachable moments creates opportunities for increased performance growth and engagement. Consistent, one-on-one touchpoints in the flow of work enable leaders to stay current on their team members' performance needs as they evolve.

At the end of the day, leadership is about others. And this type of intentional alignment supports the leader's ability to connect with each individual on a personal level, build trust and effectively influence their team members' performance and engagement.

Looking Forward ▸▸

Whatever challenges leaders face, their ability to diagnose, adapt, communicate and advance equips them with the skills necessary to evolve and lead. Any organization can look at these four competencies and evaluate whether or not their managers, team leads and executives are prepared to fulfill the critical and complex role of today's — and tomorrow's — successful leader. ⏱

Maria DalMolin is the senior learning solutions designer at The Center for Leadership Studies. Maggie Shibley is the eLearning developer at The Center for Leadership Studies. Email Maria and Maggie.

Apply the Four Competencies for Leaders ▸▸▸

🔍 Diagnose
Accurately identify the task and thoughtfully consider the facts surrounding the situation before determining Performance Readiness®.

⟲ Adapt
Recognize the individual's Performance Readiness® and consciously adjust to a matching leadership style.

💬 Communicate
Clearly articulate and implement the proper style that meets the needs of the performer.

📈 Advance
Promote the performer's task proficiency or redirect regression toward development.