7 Behaviours holding back IT Leaders

By Stephen Morris, Founder and Director, Open Square

For over a decade, I've been working in senior leadership and consulting positions for cloud computing providers and other organisations with similar high-scale and complex IT. I've proudly led some amazing teams and have worked with a wide range of IT managers, directors and CX-level people.

No matter their origin, the best leaders make magic happen. They can inspire, focus and elevate teams to new levels of autonomy, flexibility and performance. They empathise, trust and believe in capability of their teams. They create energy where there isn't any and become magnets for more great people into their teams and organisations.

As we enter the fourth industrial revolution and complexity and scale of technology increases, high calibre leaders are going to be in extremely high demand, and rightly so. However, there are leaders who will - unless they act - struggle to keep up in this new world. The following are seven behaviours that will need to change before they can get the best out of these high-tech, human-first teams.

Behaviour 1: Not treating leadership as a skill by itself

Let's imagine you've seen other people playing guitar and want to play yourself. You've not picked one up before, but you get a guitar, and you have a strum. What do you think the results are going to be? With limited exceptions acknowledged, it's unlikely that you'd be very good, even less so a virtuoso. However, with learning, regular practice and feedback you could become very good.

Leading people is comparable. Leadership is a skill that improves with learning, practice and feedback, and yet many leaders are running teams with solely their technical skill or functional experience. Many of these are thrust into leading teams, and others take the step as a way of increasing reward or recognition. Promoting great engineers for them to become mediocre leaders seems irrational at least (read The Peter Principle for more here), and I'd be concerned with the selection process that allows this to happen.

When a crisis occurs, the team need picking up, an individual is struggling or results are poor, the best leaders bring out teams that are stronger and more purposed than before. Those that don't develop those skills could end up doing the opposite, and I've seen some brilliant people pack up and leave teams for want of a few small actions.

Behaviour 2: Assuming purpose

There are plenty of examples of assumptions causing errors (take the $125 million loss of the Mars Climate Orbiter in 1999 caused by a mix up of metric and imperial units), but I'm talking about the problems caused when an assumption about purpose is made.

I'm an avid and often outspoken proponent of the importance of clarifying purpose to help motivate and focus teams (see Simon Sinek – Start With Why or Daniel Pink – Drive for a great intro). However, making assumptions about what your team is aiming for and why that's important to a goal/mission, risks missing the target in a big way and causing a team's engagement to fall through the floor.

Imagine a technical operations team, and that their purpose is to solve problems for our Customers and recover service as quickly as possible when there's an error. Sure – that sounds credible, and is important – but have you tested what your Customers really want?

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In most cases, people want intuitive services with enough tolerance that most of the time incidents just don't happen at all. A team in this scenario working hard to recover services and solve problems might deliver the best that they ever have but are always going to come up short.

Behaviour 3: Not fully engaging with the hiring process

There are many things that you can do to train and develop the skills, methods and results of a team, but typically there's a limit on what you can do. Let's think about the premier division in UK football as a parallel. How are the teams made up? Are they made up of general players from the millions that have a kick on a Sunday or are they comprised of the highest talented players each team can afford?

When leaders can add to their teams, it's essential to think about this and be absolutely connected to the process of hiring. Not being clear about the skills and style needed for the vacancy, accepting candidates from agencies who haven't been educated in detail about your needs, or not investing time partnering with people/HR teams risks poor quality hires. I suppose it's possible to build a great team from the Sunday players (assuming there's investment made in rigorous training) but you're obviously more likely to get a winning team if you start out with people already closer to your goal. Take a read of Malcolm Gladwell's Outliers for more on this.

Behaviour 4: Treating training and development as unnecessary cost

Given the current pace of technology change in all aspects of our lives, and the revolutionary nature of many of them, we are being constantly faced with gaps in our own or teams' skill. How will organisations act to solve this problem? There are normally three approaches used to meet a gap (assuming that it's seen!):

a) Leave it to chance; it can't be that hard / the team will cope / blame HR
b) Hire new people with the necessary skills
c) Up-skill / cross-skill / re-skill of existing people

My experience of training budgets and culture around training often leaves teams with option a) only: 'Each person has x allocation, no more', 'really, it's that expensive?', 'training is a reward!', 'if we train them, they'll leave!'. This gets even more complex when budgets are centralised, or the responsibility for skills management is handled outside of the team.

If the World Economic Forum's research (with the help of LinkedIn) calculates that people in the UK will, on average need to carry through some 98 days of training by 2020 to remain competitive, not changing this stance could be disastrous.

Behaviour 5: Leading from a position of supremacy

I've worked with some leaders that are genuinely phenomenal; technically superb and clearly more skilled than many people within their team. They can engage in what gets done and how it happens, yet they remain humble and don't dictate unless rare circumstances call for it.

Of course, there are leaders that occupy the opposite position. They lead from a position of superiority, believing that their skill and authority trumps any other ideas about what gets done and how.

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Operating from this position can make things simple and apparently quicker, but two assumptions are normally made. Neither are safe ground to occupy.

a)   their skill is enough to make the right call every time – no need for other input
b)   their team are happy with being told what to do all day

Behaviour 6: Holding information back from teams and colleagues

Whether intentional ('information is power', 'they don't need to worry!' or 'beyond their pay grade!') or accidental ('forgot to email the plan' etc.), we've all witnessed and likely ourselves have been kept in the dark. There are of course legitimate reasons for some data to remain privileged, but otherwise holding data holds back opportunity and performance.

The level of complexity and diversity in most technical platforms and teams is already impossible for any one person to clearly grasp. The use of automation and machine learning (in monitoring, say) helps to see patterns where humans could miss them, but this itself adds layers of complexity in its own way. Take that as a starting position - what would happen if information about purpose, resources, results, targets or policies were withheld from the team?

I've seen two main results, the first being missed opportunity. 'If only we'd known, we could have… (or we wouldn't have…)'. Second (and more pervasive) this behaviour builds distrust, an apathy and fear of trying anything, and team begin to exhibit the same behaviours with each other.

Behaviour 7: Blaming the team

Working in complex, even chaotic environments, is very difficult, though of course the rewards can be remarkable. There are new challenges being faced by teams constantly – using new skills, using tools in new ways and even delivering world-firsts. No surprise then that mistakes happen, dates sometimes slip, and some targets miss.

How this is dealt with can have a profound effect on a team and its future performance. A leader that apportions blame to their team (makes them accountable instead of themselves) will:

a)   Make people protect themselves and promote individualism
b)   Destroy creativity as people 'stay safe' for fear of failure
c)   Lead to longer planning cycles, longer delivery and more governance (protection again)
d)   Make individuals lose confidence and contribute less
e)   Create stress, anxiety and ultimately a lack of loyalty

About Open Square

We develop IT leaders who want to grow, build amazing teams and deliver better results. We provide skills workshops, coaching and a unique leadership development programme designed specifically for leaders in IT: The Open Leader Method™.

If you would like to find out how we can help you build teams that take more ownership and deliver when everything around them is changing, give us a call or drop us an email for a no-obligation discussion.

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