



THE
**THOUGHTFUL
LEADER**

**A MODEL OF
INTEGRATIVE LEADERSHIP**

JIM FISHER

The Thoughtful Leader: Introducing a Model of Integrated Leadership

Thoughtful leaders get results through people by making clear what needs to be done, why it should be done and how each person can contribute.

By Jim Fisher

Time and again, through my own eyes and those of my students, I have seen the impact of poor leadership. Indeed, it has become somewhat fashionable to lament the state of leadership today, and part of the reason is that the concept of leadership has changed so dramatically in recent years.

As our political, social and institutional environment has become increasingly volatile and uncertain, we have developed new expectations of *how leaders should act*. The old model of leading by taking charge and issuing instructions will not work in our globalized and interconnected world—a world that is, frankly, a far more interesting place to lead in than the one supported by singular ‘great-person’ theories.

Today’s most effective leaders do much more than get results: they also build the capabilities of the people around them and build effective teams and systems, so that unimagined results are achieved, both in the moment and after they are gone. If this sounds like a tough job, that’s because it is; and if it sounds like a job that requires a great deal of thought, that’s because it does. In this article, I will present a framework that reconciles the key theories about ‘what leaders do’ into an integrated model that addresses the new demands of leadership.

Three Models of Leadership

My road to creating a successful leadership course at the Rotman School of Management—and to the recognition that leadership is thoughtful work—was influenced by two key individuals. The first is

Nobel Laureate **Daniel Kahneman**, whose insight into how our brains function was captured in his book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*. In it, Kahneman demonstrates that our day-to-day actions are driven by 'fast thinking', which can be useful and efficient, but is prone to error. 'Slow thinking', on the other hand, is less likely to result in errors, but is hard mental work and tiring for the thinker. Leaders often need to react quickly, but they need to think slowly—doing the hard thoughtful work—in order to guide those quick responses. The integrated leadership model that I will present provides a framework for thinking slow in preparation for those moments that require thinking fast.

The second individual who inspired my framework is former Rotman School Dean **Roger Martin**, whose insights into Integrative Thinking were captured in *The Opposable Mind*. Roger argues that we deal with complexity by developing models of the world that *simplify* the complexity to make it more manageable. But, instead of choosing one option over another, integrative thinkers combine elements of existing models to create new and more powerful models.

Armed with these and other insights, I began to teach various elements of leadership theory to MBA students and executives. But the classroom conversations I had were far from one-way, and I often found myself in the middle of discussions about how all of the theories of leadership fit together. My students literally forced me to become more thoughtful about 'what leaders do', to become an integrative thinker in the realm of leadership, and to develop an integrative model of leadership that embraces three influential models: Managing, Directing and Engaging.

Importantly, these three models do not work in isolation. In fact they only work really well when they work together, and hence I call my framework an Integrated Leadership Model. I will examine each model in turn.

Model 1: Managing

The Managing model is akin to the original 'great person' model of

leadership. Those who embrace this approach believe that, while it is nice to think that an inspirational speech or empathetic behaviour will galvanize everyone to take the right action at the right time, it just doesn't happen that way: people and groups need to be *managed*. Meetings need agendas and follow up, and team members need defined assignments and due dates.

The Managing model has been stated in different ways over the years, but it invariably includes three elements:

1. the obligation to *plan*;
2. the need to assign and *organize* work; and
3. the necessity of *monitoring* to control the results.

This three-part 'managing cycle' implies a command-and-control mindset and a scientific approach to work: 'Be very clear about what has to be done'; 'Make sure everyone knows their job'; and, 'Set goals, and don't forget to follow up!'

The managing cycle is not just for large enterprises: people in industry have long followed it, but so does the teacher in the classroom, who has a plan for the day, the week, the term and the year.

Assignments are handed out, tasks assigned and work evaluated. Likewise, in a busy hospital, the nurse manager possesses recognized technical expertise, but he or she is also an intuitive expert at planning, organizing and controlling. Even if neither the teacher nor the nurse went to business school to learn the managing cycle, it has become so deeply engrained in 'the way we do things' that it feels natural.

Model 2: Directing

As the pace of change accelerated over time, it became clear that the Managing model had its limits. The need for leaders to do something beyond managing was most influentially noted by Harvard Business School Professor **John Kotter**, in his seminal 1990 article, "What Do Leaders Really Do?" Having surveyed the wreckage of 'well-managed' companies and the emergence of

new powerhouses throughout the 1980s, Kotter concluded that the most effective executives were not just managers: they did something else entirely, which he called *leading*. I prefer to call this skill Directing, because I believe there is more to it than the elements laid out in Kotter's model. Nomenclature aside, Kotter's model was a significant addition to the Managing model, and it includes three key elements.

Start with Vision. Kotter's approach starts with the idea that in a world of constant change, it is critical to have a compass—a central idea of what the enterprise is trying to achieve. **Simon Sinek** captured this in his best-seller, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*. His powerful-yet-simple idea is this: we are more effective when we know *why* an action is required. The job of the leader, then, is to articulate the *why*—the reason each individual should care about the work that she has been asked to do.

Importantly, it is not just the job of the CEO or founder to have a clear vision: the IT specialist working on a software project will be more effective if there is a vision for *what this particular project is intended to accomplish*, articulated in a way that is meaningful to each member of the team. Is the goal to find a quick fix to a problem, or does the team need to work towards more substantive change? Is the goal to solve a problem for one particular business unit, or is there an opportunity to build connectivity across the enterprise?

Build Alignment. Because Directing starts with an idea that can be articulated as a vision or 'statement of purpose', it begins with a lot of thought and care. It is hard enough to formulate and commit to a vision; but once that vision is crystallized, it is even tougher to build alignment. The fact is, a vision will go nowhere if it cannot be effectively sold, and as a result, the next hard task of leadership is to be able to articulate the vision—to find powerful words that capture the idea and the courage to take a stand. Every vision statement includes some things and leaves out others; and every vision

statement sets an aspiration, a bar against which the leader will be assessed.

To achieve alignment, leaders must be highly effective communicators, using whatever style or forum they find most effective to get people to understand the vision, recognize its possibilities and limitations and, ultimately, agree that it articulates the best way forward—and that they want to be part of the journey. Achieving the latter is about engendering commitment, not acquiescence, and it takes explicit, thoughtful effort to achieve the commitment that comes from alignment.

Find Motivation. It is great for people to know the direction the organization is taking and to agree that it is right; but it is not enough. It takes proactive effort to make changes, and the best leaders pay attention to the range of elements that motivate changes in behaviour. Although a good deal of management theory focuses on economic motivation, there are many other motivators, including a feeling of belonging, an opportunity to contribute to something meaningful, an increased sense of self-worth, the opportunity to grow as a person, and perhaps an opportunity for some tangible reward—a promotion opportunity, or just a pat on the back. All of these are tools that thoughtful leaders employ.

Model 3: Engaging

To summarize, Managing tells people *what* to do; and Directing tells them *why* they are doing it. Powerful ideas, especially when combined, as they bring a sense of order and purpose to the daily grind of work. But in our volatile, uncertain and complex world, Managing and Directing are no longer enough.

Unpredictable change is the new normal, and in a world that may never again be characterized as *stable* or *orderly*, leaders need workers who are so highly engaged in their work that they respond and react when needed—not only when asked or when told to do so. As a result, we need a third model: Engaging.

Several decades ago, **Joseph Badaracco** and **Richard Ellsworth** wrote *Leadership and the Quest for Integrity*, in which they set out three workable models of leadership behaviour founded on different ideas about workplace motivation. They called the three approaches Values Driven, Directive and Political, and they argued that leaders should prefer one approach to another.

Based on all my years in the classroom and the boardroom, I have modified these approaches somewhat, evolving them into three aspects of engaging today's employees: Involvement, Clarity and Values. I will describe each in turn.

Involvement. This first behavioural directive is based on the simple idea that *people want to contribute to the decisions that affect their lives*; and they want to contribute in two ways. First, at a basic level, they want some control over what they do every day at work. They don't want to be told every last detail about how to do their job: they want to know what is *expected* of them, but then they want some latitude in determining how it gets done. But a truly engaged workforce wants even more than that: it wants to contribute to the success of the whole enterprise. When people have ideas, they want someone to pay attention to them—and not via an old-school suggestion box. Leaders who build truly engaged workforces ensure that work is organized in such a way that people are encouraged to use their creativity and initiative on a regular basis, and that the available mechanisms for additional contribution are clear and accessible.

Clarity. The thoughtful leader knows that an involved workforce is an extremely valuable asset, as people will find new and better ways to do their own jobs and contribute ideas to the overall enterprise. She also recognizes that people are likely to put more effort into something that was their own idea than in implementing another person's idea. But thoughtful leaders also know that there cannot be chaos in an organization: people can't disrupt the main flow of the enterprise for every idea that they might dream up. As a result,

the thoughtful work required here is the ability to shape a consensus around the leader's own agenda, so that people feel that they 'own it'—and it was not simply imposed from above.

Derived from what Badaracco and Ellsworth called Directive Leadership, my notion of Clarity sets the boundaries for Involvement. The research of my Rotman colleague **Gary Latham** and University of Maryland Professor **Edwin Locke** shows that people are most motivated by the challenge of meeting externally-set goals that are tough-but-clear. It is far better to set a specific goal than to just ask people to 'do their best'. People are drawn to—and prone to follow—leaders who are able to make clear, strong decisions. They look to those who will make tough calls and lament those who leave big questions unanswered. There is something reassuring about working in a place where decisions are timely and clear—even if they are not always what you want to hear.

Values. The Values-focused leader knows that people want to feel that what they do is meaningful when measured against a set of principles that they believe in. In the best of all worlds, they want to feel that they work for an inherently-good organization that does intrinsically valuable work, alongside colleagues they respect. The Values-focused leader believes that people are more likely to make the right choices on substantive matters if they are guided by the right set of values. She articulates and lives those values as a role model for the organization, and people follow her because they feel better about themselves for being part of such a powerful community.

The Integrated Model

As indicated, the most effective leaders today don't simply choose one of the three models of leadership over another. Instead, they integrate them: they Manage, Direct *and* Engage, consistently and coherently. The result: a Thoughtful Leader who is prepared to navigate the rocky terrain of the modern environment.

Leaders who proactively choose to integrate these three models will find that each model serves to make the others more effective. For example, all *plans* have within them an implied or stated *vision* and an implied or stated set of *values*; and the *vision* will likely be realized if it is embedded in the *plan* and supported by the *values*. It doesn't really matter where one starts in the integrated model: if all of the elements are lined up and consistent, it will make each of them more effective.

In closing

There is no question about it, leadership is more challenging by the day, with no end—or even a slowdown—in sight. But despite this irreversible fact, I remain highly optimistic about the state of leadership in our world.

When I started out in the classroom, many leaders were still stuck in the command-and-control mindset, with an image that they could climb the corporate ladder by 'bossing' people around. It was a revelation to lay out the ideas of John Kotter—about the need to be visionary, to be a committed salesperson for the vision, and to focus on motivation rather than compliance.

I am pleased to report that based on my experience, today's students of leadership fully embrace the idea that to lead is to bring out the best in the people around you. There are many would-be leaders out there, armed with great ideas and intentions, and even in our uncertain world, one thing is certain: a world where more people step up to lead when they see a need will be a better world.

Jim Fisher is Professor Emeritus and the former Vice Dean of the Rotman School of Management. He started his career with McKinsey before founding The Canada Consulting Group, which became the Canadian office of The Boston Consulting Group. He joined George Weston Ltd. in 1986 and served as Executive Vice President of Weston Foods, Chairman and President of William Neilson Limited and President of George Weston North American Bakeries. Voted 'Teacher of the Year' by MBA students, Jim teaches Strategy, Leadership and Organization Design. He is the author of *The Thoughtful Leader* (Rotman-UTP Publishing, 2016), from which this article is adapted.

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FIGURE ONE: THE INTEGRATED LEADERSHIP MODEL

