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Research overview
May 2014

Tackling the barriers to leadership

WORK   WORKFORCE   WORKPLACE

Championing better work and working lives

The CIPD's purpose is to **champion better work and working lives** by improving practices in people and organisation development, for the benefit of individuals, businesses, economies and society. Our research work plays a critical role – providing the content and credibility for us to drive practice, raise standards and offer advice, guidance and practical support to the profession. Our research also informs our advocacy and engagement with policy-makers and other opinion-formers on behalf of the profession we represent.

To increase our impact, in service of our purpose, we're focusing our research agenda on three core themes: the future of **work**, the diverse and changing nature of the **workforce**, and the culture and organisation of the **workplace**.

WORK

Our focus on work includes what work is and where, when and how work takes place, as well as trends and changes in skills and job needs, changing career patterns, global mobility, technological developments and new ways of working.

WORKFORCE

Our focus on the workforce includes demographics, generational shifts, attitudes and expectations, the changing skills base and trends in learning and education.

WORKPLACE

Our focus on the workplace includes how organisations are evolving and adapting, understanding of culture, trust and engagement, and how people are best organised, developed, managed, motivated and rewarded to perform at their best.

About us

The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. We have over 130,000 members internationally – working in HR, learning and development, people management and consulting across private businesses and organisations in the public and voluntary sectors. We are an independent and not-for-profit organisation, guided in our work by the evidence and the front-line experience of our members.

Tackling the barriers to leadership

CIPD research shows that the need for leadership has changed following the global shifts in the ways we work today. While organisations are seen to be better at understanding leadership at the highest levels in the hierarchy, many are now seeking to devolve leadership down the line, expecting more junior managers and employees without managerial responsibility to treat the organisational agenda as their own.

Our report *Leadership – easier said than done* looks in detail at the barriers to leadership and good people management in practice. It considers how the internal organisational environments support the demands placed on managers and leaders facing external challenges, and argues that there is, at times, a mismatch between the rhetoric of improving leadership capacity and the organisational context (including people management systems and processes).

Exploring the systemic barriers to leadership, we identified four groups of challenges present in some organisations today.

1 Hierarchical structures
For many organisations, information-sharing and quicker decision-making are key to the success of their business, particularly when it concerns employees in customer-facing roles and cross-functional teams. Although some organisations have cut down the number of managerial levels and placed more accountability on the front line, our research shows that employees do not always feel empowered to make independent decisions.

One aspect of organisational context that undermines empowerment is the apparent lack of communication between the 'strategic' and the 'operational' sides of the business. Some senior managers perceive operational departments as lacking the understanding of the strategic needs of the organisation and as being resistant to change. As a result, they adopt a command and control approach in the circumstances of change, as directive leadership is expected to bring greater performance results more quickly. Trust becomes a particularly acute issue in change, as the organisation expects its people to embrace uncertainty.

2 Short-term, bottom-line focus
The second challenge to leadership in the organisations is the tension between the sustainability of performance and the immediate balance of profit and cost. More organisations are now concerned with sustainability of performance and the ethical aspects of decision-making, and are including relevant measures in their behaviour and/or value frameworks. However, in practice, the message that some individuals are actually receiving through performance management processes, and through informal aspects of organisational culture, may be emphasising the value of short-term bottom-line priorities over 'how' things are done.

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Across the organisations in the study individuals noted that, even where behaviour frameworks are in place to guide sustainable leadership and management behaviours, 'at heart' they knew they would primarily be judged on how well they meet their targets. In fact, some respondents suggested that a certain 'halo' effect exists around good performers, who are unlikely to be marked down on the softer side of their skills as long as they can manage the expectations of their bosses.

3 Individualism

In many organisations reward and progression routes are linked to the process of an employee setting and delivering on a set of individual targets. However, that process is not always effectively aligned with the wider organisational objectives, which leads to conflict of priorities between departments. In the absence of clarity on how one's performance contributes to the wider vision, blame culture and perverse incentives may re-focus individuals' efforts on what is likely to serve their own performance

objectives and prevent penalties, rather than on longer-term and company goals. One manager in the CIPD study said:

> *The problem with targets is everything is focused towards hitting that target, and you lose sight of everything else you should be doing. You lose your ability to lead because you're being pressured into doing stuff. And that's when the career-limiting stuff comes in: if I don't deliver against those targets I will never get promoted.*

Focus on individual performance is one of the reasons why managers may be adopting a directive leadership style rather than empowering and coaching their staff. When faced with time-sensitive tasks, they are more likely to revert to a hands-on approach, aiming to deliver on the short-term objectives.

4 'Us' and 'them' mentality

The final challenge for organisations, leaders and

managers today is embracing workforce diversity. Diversity comprises not just the differences in people's demographic characteristics (gender, language, culture, and so on) but also work styles and opinions. Although diversity has been shown to bring clear benefits to organisations in the form of greater innovation potential and an improved customer experience, people management processes (for example lengthy and rigidly enforced behavioural frameworks) can inadvertently favour 'sameness' over the desirable level of variety in local teams and corporately.

Organisational policies and procedures aimed at maintaining a fair approach may have become overly prescriptive. Managers in the study explain that they often experience tension between, on the one hand, the blanket policy that should be applied to staff to ensure a standard of organisational behaviour and, on the other hand, their need to allow for the variety of circumstances that require individuals to make independent decisions.

Case studies

The global trends impacting the world of work today may call for quicker decisions and bottom-line mentality, and it is unlikely that organisational practitioners can reverse macro-level transformation. At the same time, they can make a difference by adopting a more systemic approach to identifying and fulfilling organisations' needs for more effective leadership throughout the business.

While organisations have traditionally focused on developing the capability of individual leaders and managers, we recommend that they give greater consideration to the factors that impact the ability of individuals to apply their skills in practice.

To help practitioners take a step from training individual leaders to improving the leadership capacity

of the organisation as a whole, we are publishing a series of case studies that illustrate the specific approaches some organisations have taken to understand what leadership their organisation needs and align the organisational context to support leadership. These case studies are available to download as separate PDFs accompanying this overview.