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THE WRONG SORT OF LEADER

The trouble with “Strong leadership”



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THE TROUBLE WITH “STRONG LEADERSHIP”

Boards search for strong leaders when they should be asking which kind of leadership the organisation actually needs. Leadership is not one quality but can easily be defined in at least six distinct shapes, or jobs that leadership should be able to perform. Executives should readily carry these in their tool kit.

Leadership is the business world’s universal diagnosis. When strategy drifts, morale sinks or a transformation stalls, the explanation is invariably the same: a failure of leadership. The word is asked to account for almost everything and, as a result, increasingly does not convey much of the root cause.

Ask ten executives to define leadership and the answers will form a collage of admirable abstractions: vision, collaboration, courage, authenticity, purpose, empathy and resilience. Few will be wrong. Few will be actionable.

The confusion is not entirely the product of sloppy thinking. During the past century, some of the most influential writers on organisations have examined leadership through fundamentally different lenses. Peter Drucker was interested in choice. John Kotter in change. Warren Bennis in the conditions under which people perform. Niccolò Machiavelli in power. Henry Mintzberg in the work of getting things done. Marshall Goldsmith in individual growth.

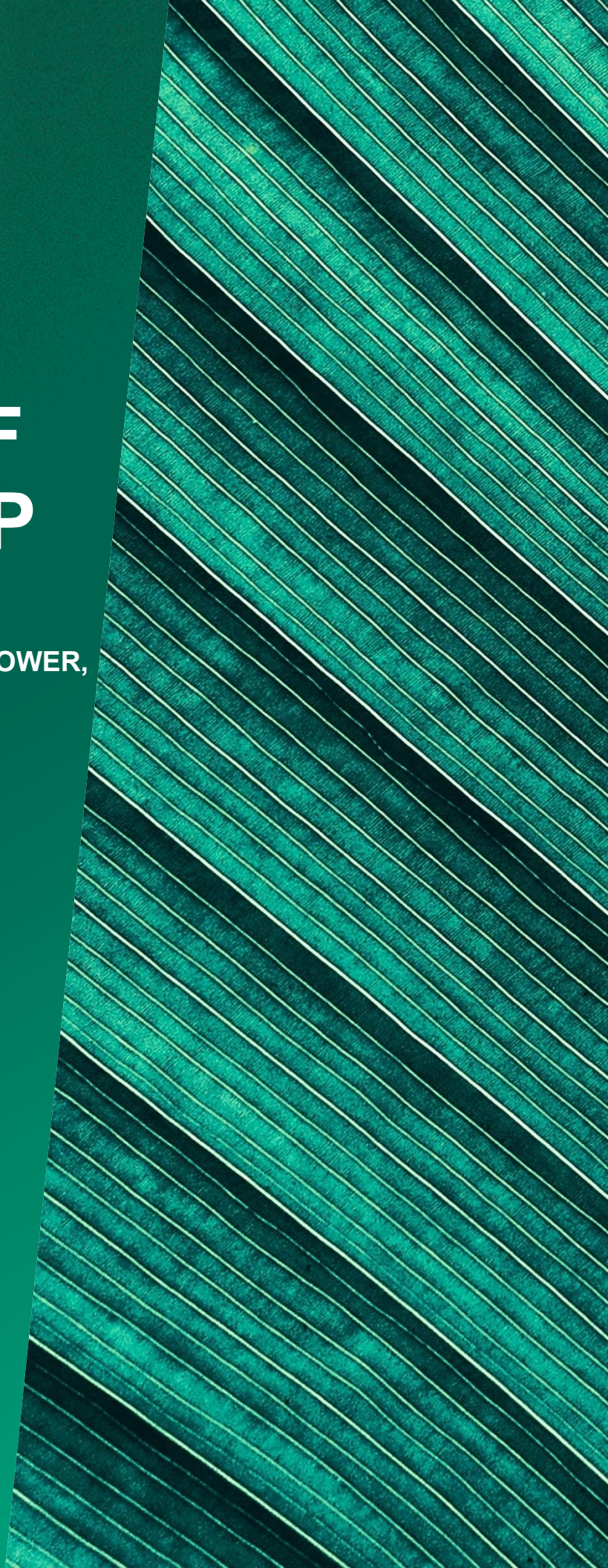
These are often treated as competing definitions of leadership. They are better understood as answers to different questions. Together, they describe six jobs that organisations need leaders to perform.

The jobs overlap. They are not interchangeable. A company that lacks direction will not be rescued by a more inspiring culture. A business unable to execute does not necessarily need another visionary. An organisation paralysed by internal politics may have a perfectly sensible strategy. **Many apparent leadership failures are, in fact, failures of diagnosis: the organisation needs one kind of leadership and receives another.**

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SIX JOBS OF LEADERSHIP

DIRECTION, CHANGE, CULTURE, POWER, EXECUTION AND GROWTH



SIX JOBS OF LEADERSHIP

WHAT ORGANISATIONS NEED LEADERS TO DO

1 **Direction** Peter Drucker — Page 5
Choosing: deciding what the organisation is for

2 **Change** John Kotter — Page 6
Mobilising: turning an argument into collective motion

3 **Culture** Warren Bennis — Page 7
Shaping: making honesty productive

4 **Power** Niccolò Machiavelli — Page 8
Navigating: building the coalition behind a decision

5 **Execution** Henry Mintzberg — Page 9
Delivering: making sure decisions become reality

6 **Growth** Marshall Goldsmith — Page 10
Developing: making talented people stronger

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DIRECTION

JOB 1 OF 6 | PETER DRUCKER ON CHOICE

For Peter Drucker, the central question was not how energetically an organisation worked, but whether it was working on the right things.

This is the distinction between effectiveness and efficiency. Efficiency improves the relationship between effort and output. Effectiveness determines which outputs matter in the first place. The former makes the machine run better; the latter decides what the machine is for.

Direction is therefore less about declaring ambitions than making choices. Most companies have no shortage of aspirations. They want to grow, innovate, delight customers, develop talent, improve margins and become more sustainable; preferably all at once. This is not strategy. It is a refusal to choose.

The work of direction is largely the work of exclusion. Which customers matter most? Which markets will the company not enter? Which capabilities deserve scarce capital? Which initiatives should be stopped even though intelligent people have invested their reputations in them?

When this form of leadership is working, it can seem almost unremarkable. Priorities are understood. Resources follow them. People can explain not only what the organisation is doing, but why.

Its absence is more conspicuous. Meetings multiply, projects accumulate and employees remain industrious, yet progress is strangely elusive. A firm with 20 priorities has none. In prosperous periods, such ambiguity can be concealed by growth. Under pressure, it becomes unaffordable.

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01

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CHANGE

JOB 2 OF 6 | JOHN KOTTER ON CHANGE

Direction is not necessarily a shift in movement. John Kotter's concern was how organisations travel from one state to another.

Companies are generally designed to reproduce yesterday's success: processes create consistency, hierarchies preserve control and incentives reward predictable performance. These qualities are useful until the world changes. And the world has an irritating habit of doing so.

A new strategy may be intellectually persuasive and still fail to alter behaviour. This is because resistance is rarely caused by ignorance alone. Existing routines embody careers, identities, budgets and status. What appears from the boardroom as an obviously necessary transformation may appear elsewhere as a threat to competence, influence or employment.

Change leadership turns an argument into collective motion. It creates urgency without producing panic. It assembles a coalition with enough credibility to overcome inertia. It repeats the case for change long after senior executives have grown tired of hearing it. It produces visible progress before scepticism hardens into defeat.

Poor change programmes often treat resistance as a communications problem: if only the slides were clearer, people would fall into line. Sometimes they would. More often, resistance reflects a rational defence of interests. A leader who cannot identify what people believe they stand to lose will struggle to persuade them of what the organisation might gain.

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02

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CULTURE

JOB 3 OF 6 | WARREN BENNIS ON CULTURE

Movement can be compelled for a time. Commitment cannot.

Warren Bennis was concerned with the human environment in which performance takes place. Why does the same individual flourish in one institution and retreat in another? Why do some organisations surface problems early, whereas others discover them only when they have become crises?

Capability is not exercised in a vacuum. People watch leaders for clues about how the organisation really works. Who is rewarded? What happens to the bearer of bad news? Is disagreement treated as disloyalty? Are mistakes examined or concealed? Do senior executives follow the rules they proclaim for everyone else?

Culture is the answer employees construct from these repeated observations. This makes culture less a collection of stated values than a system of expectations. Posters may advertise collaboration while incentives reward internal competition. Leaders may praise candour while punishing those who practise it. An organisation's culture is not what its executives say they believe. It is what people learn they can safely do.

The leader's task is not to make everyone comfortable. High-performing cultures are often demanding. The task is to make honesty productive: to combine trust with standards, challenge with respect and accountability with the possibility of recovery.

At its best, culture is not corporate decoration. It is the infrastructure through which talent becomes performance.

An organisation's culture is not what its executives say they believe. **It is what people learn they can safely do.**

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POWER

JOB 4 OF 6 | NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI ON POWER

Culture does not abolish politics.

Modern management writing tends to treat power as leadership's disreputable cousin. It prefers the language of alignment, engagement and shared purpose. Niccolò Machiavelli was less delicate yet eloquent. He understood that collective life involves competing interests, scarce resources and unstable coalitions.

Every organisation has two constitutions: the one represented by the organisational chart and the one that operates in practice. The first shows reporting lines. The second reveals who can delay a decision, who controls information, whose support confers legitimacy and whose silence signals opposition.

Senior leaders who attend only to the first constitution are liable to be governed by the second.

Political leadership does not require deception or ruthlessness. It requires realism. Boards, investors, regulators, unions, customers and internal factions do not cease to have interests simply because a strategy is logically compelling. Decisions depend not only on the quality of an idea but on the coalition behind it.

The ethical question is not whether leaders use power; leadership without power is little more than commentary. The question is whether power is used to advance the institution or merely to preserve the leader.

Political skill without purpose becomes manipulation. Purpose without political skill becomes impotence. Political innocence is not always virtue. Sometimes it is incompetence wearing a halo.

Political innocence is not always virtue. **Sometimes it is incompetence wearing a halo.**

04

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EXECUTION

JOB 5 OF 6 | HENRY MINTZBERG ON EXECUTION

Even an organisation with a sound direction, a persuasive case for change, a strong culture and a workable coalition can still fail for a more prosaic reason: nothing happens.

Henry Mintzberg spent much of his career puncturing the mythology of managerial work. The popular image of the leader is contemplative and commanding: a figure setting direction from above. The reality is more fragmented. Senior executives spend much of their time resolving conflicts, exchanging information, allocating attention, making partial decisions and ensuring that other decisions do not quietly evaporate.

This is the unglamorous architecture of execution. Responsibilities must be clear. Decisions must have owners. Resources must arrive before deadlines. Dependencies must be managed. Performance must be reviewed often enough to correct it.

The cult of the visionary rests upon an army of competent operators. Yet organisations routinely praise leadership while treating management as something faintly pedestrian. They celebrate strategy, transformation and purpose while neglecting operating rhythms, decision rights and follow-through. The result is corporate theatre: compelling presentations followed by remarkably familiar outcomes.

Execution is strategy's audit trail. It reveals which priorities were real, because real priorities receive money, talent and management attention. Everything else was rhetoric. Customers discover the difference quickly. Investors discover it eventually.

Execution is strategy's audit trail. It reveals which priorities were real.

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GROWTH

JOB 6 OF 6 | MARSHALL GOLDSMITH ON GROWTH

The sixth job operates at the level of the individual.

Marshall Goldsmith's territory is behaviour: the habits, assumptions and interpersonal reflexes that help people advance and then begin to limit them. At senior levels, failure is rarely caused by an absence of intelligence. More often, strengths have become overextended. Confidence becomes certainty. Decisiveness becomes impatience. Attention to detail becomes interference. Persuasiveness becomes an inability to listen.

The leader as developer helps others recognise and alter these patterns. This is sometimes described as coaching, a word that can make the task sound gentler than it is. Serious development requires leaders to say what others avoid. It involves challenge without humiliation, support without indulgence and accountability without intimidation. It requires enough confidence to make talented people less dependent on the leader rather than more so.

Its effect is multiplicative. Every strategy ultimately depends on thousands of decisions and conversations that senior management will never witness. An organisation improves when the people making those decisions improve.

Development is therefore not a concession to employees or a process to be delegated to human resources. It is a method of increasing organisational capability.

A leader who leaves behind no stronger people may have improved the results. He has done less to improve the institution.

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CHOOSING THE RIGHT LEADER

CONTEXT DETERMINES THE WEIGHTING



THE TROUBLE WITH "STRONG LEADERSHIP"

These six jobs are not six personality types. Nor must one heroic individual perform all of them equally well. Leadership can be distributed across an executive team and often should be. But the work must be done somewhere.

A turnaround may require direction, power, change and execution in rapid succession. A fast-growing company may discover that its problem is no longer entrepreneurial energy but operating discipline. A mature institution may need less strategic reinvention than cultural renewal and the development of a credible next generation.

Context determines the weighting. This is where executive boards can go wrong. They ask whether a candidate is a "strong leader", as though leadership were a substance that some people possess in greater quantities than others. Selection processes then reward generic impressiveness: confidence, fluency and a well-rehearsed philosophy of purpose.

A better process would begin with the problem. What must be different in two years' time? Is the central challenge one of choice, movement, trust, influence, delivery or capability? Which of these tasks must the chief executive perform personally? Which can be supplied by the rest of the team? Which weakness would be inconvenient, and which would be fatal?

Candidates should then be tested against evidence rather than adjectives. What did they stop? Which entrenched interests did they overcome? How did they respond when bad news challenged their preferred view? Which decisions became reality because of their intervention? Who became substantially better under their leadership?

Leadership, then, is not a mystical quality. It is a repertoire of acts: choosing, mobilising, shaping, navigating, delivering and developing.

The most effective leaders are not equally gifted at all six. They are self-aware enough to know which is required, humble enough to borrow the capabilities they lack and alert enough to change their approach when the problem changes.

A REPERTOIRE OF ACTS

- **Choosing** Direction
- **Mobilising** Change
- **Shaping** Culture
- **Navigating** Power
- **Delivering** Execution
- **Developing** Growth

ABOUT KORN FERRY

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