



Esther Cameron

Growing leadership maturity

Messiness and leadership maturity

Not all work problems are complex as Snowden points out so elegantly in his [seminal article about decision-making](#). However it's clear from our recent client work that leaders at all levels are being asked to deal with ever-more complex and uncertain contexts, and that many are experiencing this as testing and stressful.

Multi-layered challenges for leaders

A whole range of factors are contributing to this trend: a globalized economy, advances in technology, demographic shifts, a multi-generational workforce, the constant pressure to do more with less, shifting employment contracts and permeable organizational boundaries. All of these add layers of difficulty and challenge.

These factors are requiring leaders to develop a new, more 'mature' set of leadership skills. Rather than a whole new way of leading, this is actually an *expansion* of what we normally see leaders doing. Some refer to this as [vertical development](#).

Politics and mistrust of complexity

In the political arena, many people have become fed up with and mistrustful of the [interconnected complexities](#) that have developed in our institutions over the last few decades. Through the election of Trump and the opting for Brexit, there is demand for more straightforward forms of leadership, and simpler-sounding solutions.

However, our experience indicates that this simplistic type of approach is doomed not to deliver in the longer term, although it may feel gratifying for a while.

Meanwhile in private and public sector organisations, things continue to get messier and messier and leaders need to learn how to deal with this.



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What does 'mature' leadership involve?

Most medium and large-sized organisations train their leaders to master the art of delivering agreed outcomes through people. A range of useful skills are usually taught as part of standard leadership programmes, such as envisaging, strategic thinking, planning, delegating, reviewing, coaching, teambuilding, managing people etc.

This is a sound basis, but to be able to deal with more complex contexts, deeper capacities are required which are not so easy to teach. [Research by Kempster at al.](#) indicates that these capacities have to be learned and embedded over time through a commitment to practicing new forms of leading in situ, and reflecting on these in an open and honest way. This type of development may also force leaders to understand and untangle the impact of their early history on their behaviours, ideally with the support of a mature coach.

Developing complexity capacities

Core complexity capacities can be summarised as: seeing and working with patterns and connections; welcoming ambiguity, contradictions and paradoxes; developing a multi-framed approach; and thinking long-term (3-5 years plus).

The expansion in capacity required is illustrated more fully in the table below. This table also shows how this expansion means 'including' traditional leadership skills as part of a wider set, rather than moving away from them.

Achievement orientation

Ensures planned outcomes by driving progress

Clarifies accountabilities and helps sort out conflicts or stuckness

Creatively motivates others to work towards clear goals, while seeking efficiencies and improvements
Provides a 3-6 month plan with milestones and clear outcomes

Complexity orientation

Continually tracks and anticipates change at multiple levels – seeing patterns and connections, and 'pulling' the right levers at the right time
Regularly convenes cross-boundary discussions that clarify purpose, intentions, values and priorities. Also surfaces hidden agendas or anxieties in a non-anxious, non-defensive way
Creates a picture of the change destination that engages and attracts followers across different levels of maturity and with different loyalties
Offers elegant frames and structures to support complex change efforts and maintains long-range, system-wide view



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Table: Enacting Leadership at Different Levels of Maturity

[Extract from Essential Leadership, Cameron and Green, Kogan Page, 2017]

Careful research and development work performed 10 years ago by [Bill Torbert and colleagues](#) tells us that with the right level of support, adults can carry on maturing as human beings way beyond the stage that many of us perceive as 'adult' or 'fully developed'.

The bad news is that only a small percentage of organizational leaders currently have the appropriate level of maturity to lead in today's complex context, so most of us have a way to go.

The need for courage and commitment!

So what can leaders do to start to develop these more 'mature' capacities? This is not easy and takes practice in the workplace and steady commitment. The personal, short-term pay-off in our experience is that stress is reduced, and work becomes more enjoyable.

For individuals wanting to mature, there are a number of prerequisites:

- courageous self-awareness about your current skill level; genuine openness to feedback from others wherever possible
- realism about your current maturity level, even if this feels painful
- a reasonable amount of motivation and life ambition
- willingness to bring considerable discipline and rigour to the learning process
- an ability to be kind to yourself about progress rather than harsh or judgmental.

Suggestions for next steps

It's good to have a set of principles, but what could some concrete next steps look like? Here are a few



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pragmatic ways forward which should help individual leaders to get started:

1. Start to experiment with sharing decision-making and/or considering different solutions which deliver different levels of satisfaction for the various parties involved
2. Track change at multiple levels, from multiple 'angles' - personal, team, departmental, whole business...
3. Become more aware of your own reactions to others, including unearthing appreciations and inquiring into irritations
4. Practice 'immediacy': checking in, maybe twice a day, on your [mental](#), [emotional](#) and [physical state](#)
5. Consider engaging with a coach to help you reflect on your live, leadership experiences and their impact. This is particularly effective if the coach has worked to develop his/her own maturity.

A deeper question of motivation!

Beneath this journey to grow as a leader lies another deeper question concerning values and motivation. What are our basic needs as human beings, and what does our personality structure, formed over many years of experience, drive us to do?

Understanding this territory can be very powerful. For example, if a leader's need for approval competes with her need for power, her personal growth may plateau. Lifting the lid on this takes courage but can support dramatic inner growth. Try this [free questionnaire](#) as a starting point.

Further help?

While this advice may be slow-burn for some, and is unlikely to win you political plaudits any time soon, I trust it can help you to continue to deliver ever more authentic forms of leadership, whatever the challenges ahead.

If you'd like to find out more about how to develop your own and/or your colleagues' leadership maturity from a variety of starting points, you can find all sorts of content to help you with this in Esther Cameron's



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[new book.](#)

Or sign on to my regular leadership digest via the banner above.

Thanks to Fred Preston at www.localphotoguide.com.au for the beautiful image of dervishes.