

Leading Edge

Management and Team Development Consultants

Think about your organisational model and change it

We can probably all recall examples in our lives of good and not-so-good leadership. For some, getting the chance to become a leader is an opportunity to show others how it should be done. A chance to eradicate the poor examples of the past. However, many people actually find it difficult to be the type of leader they really want to be. They may feel the need to exercise new leadership styles but something seems to get in the way.

Of course this could be attributed to many things but one thing which will really help is to create a mental model which supports desired leadership styles.

We all have a mental model (or paradigm) of how we think organisations work. A typical one which resides in the heads of many people is the classic pyramidal organisation structure. At the top sits the most important person, the boss. 50 years ago this person would have owned the business and had his name above the door. His primary purpose was in achieving success in ways that could be measured mainly in financial terms.

On the next level sits a group of capable people that have almost certainly been selected by the boss. Paid well, they head up key departments in the business and support the boss in achieving his purposes. They select the next layer of staff which sit at a level below them. These would generally be experienced people who have worked their way up through the industry, time-served people with a certain robustness required to handle some of the tough issues which go with jobs at this level.

Next come the supervisory grades (again promoted from below) and finally the shop floor workers (or their equivalent in non-production industries).

Many organisations will (and do) draft out their organisational structure charts in this format.

What is really emphasised by this structure is a dependency on the boss for information, control, direction and pace. It is not expected that there will much in the way of two-way communication. The system becomes self-fulfilling. The people at the bottom actually become dependent on the upper layers for direction and control... to the extent that they either can't or won't operate without it. This in turn perpetuates what it is that the managers have to do to maintain adequate levels of productiveness... press down harder and control more.

A better way to envisage an organisational entity is to simply turn the model upside down.

Put the most important people at the top – this time it is the workforce. Organise them into teams for purposes of the functions they serve (or for the areas of the job they work on or the shifts etc.). Give each team a **supporter**. (Try to avoid calling them 'supervisor' or 'charge hand' – this really doesn't help). Give each group of supporters a **supporter**... and in turn give each successive hierarchical group a **supporter** until left with the boss (**the ultimate supporter**) at the bottom.

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Already we are beginning to change our language. The mere act of re-drawing the organisational structure has introduced the word '**supporter**' four times. This tells us a lot about what is expected of people in these roles. Of course, we want direction, control and pace too. But, equally, we want to emphasise the need for support.

Now, when we start to train people in 'soft skills' it all start to make sense. As we select our position in the inverted pyramid and look up at the people we are there support it becomes blindingly obvious what's required of us. It makes sense that we know how to encourage others, how to communicate, how to motivate, how and why we should delegate, how to coach, how effective our relationships should be and how to promote teamwork. It also makes sense that we get our systems in order, working in ways that support our staff by facilitating what they need to do. It is obvious, too, that we develop clear vision with which to guide them.

It is precisely that simple and it is also that hard! No-one is saying that this is easy but it is truly a fundamental step in helping managers understand the real meaning behind their role.

If this topic interests you, get in touch.