

Employment Relations Comment

September 2016

Employment Relations

Comment will be distributed free of charge via email. Copies can also be downloaded from www.acas.org.uk.

Employment Relations Comment will provide short accessible features on topical employment relations issues.

This article was written by the Acas Strategy Unit.

We welcome your comments. These should be sent to policypublications@acas.org.uk

The views expressed in **Employment Relations Comment** are those of the authors and not the Acas Council.

The Acas framework for effective leadership

When do you become a leader? Does it happen when you reach a senior position in an organisation, or as soon as you manage a person or a team? Or is leadership as much about demonstrating the right values, principles and skills whatever your role in the organisation?

The Acas 'framework for effective leadership' is intended to help both junior and senior managers identify the qualities in themselves, and those around them, that can build workplace relationships that are productive, trusting and mutually rewarding.

The leadership triangle (see overleaf) is based upon four levels of understanding and action. It is not intended to be prescriptive, but sets out the skills, legal requirements and values that can help any leader be effective in their role. It also points to further advice that can be found in other Acas guidance. The triangle is informed by the millions of customer interactions Acas advisors have every year. The four levels are:

- 1. Know your stuff.** This refers to all the nuts and bolts of working life, everything from employment law to disciplinary policies and procedures.
- 2. Refine your skills.** Here the focus is on communicating, listening, telling, motivating and liaising – in essence, the ability to engage well with people.
- 3. Be aware of organisational responsibilities.** The hardest part of leadership is often balancing individual and group concerns, and encouraging the right behavioural norms.
- 4. Strive for those essential characteristics.** The best leaders have a personal style that is reflexive, emotionally intelligent and openly accommodates both strength and vulnerability.

A framework for effective leadership



What the triangle tells us is that the qualities and skills needed for effective leadership are shared by junior and senior managers alike. So, whether you are running a multi-national company or a small team – the four levels apply to you.

Of course, the emphasis will differ. Junior managers will need more emphasis on the first two levels ('Know your stuff' and 'Refine your skills'), while for more senior managers the top levels are usually more important ('Be aware of your organisational responsibilities' and 'Strive for those essential characteristics').

Level 1: Know your stuff

Most workplaces are governed by regulations and policies. They are the first required level of understanding for leaders at all levels:

- **Regulations** - in the form of employment law and case law - determine things like wages, contracts, equality, redundancy handling, parental rights etc. Check out Acas' 'A-Z' listing.
- **Policies.** Many workplace policies go beyond what is prescribed by law and encourage staff to behave in a way that suits the particular context of an organisation as well as wider cultural and social values.

For junior managers to lead and influence effectively, they need to be very familiar and confident with what Acas refers to as the 'Big Five' management issues: discipline and grievances, absence, performance, wellbeing and managing change.

Level 2: Refine your skills

Research has shown that, with the right approach, managers can trigger 'positive discretionary behaviour' amongst their colleagues. This is critical when it comes to boosting productivity and job satisfaction, and involves developing the following skills:

- **Influencing.** This is often about translating senior management messages into a local context that staff can understand and relate to, and also communicating the views of staff back up the line
- **Liaising.** Dealing effectively and constructively with internal stakeholders – such as colleagues elsewhere in the organisation, HR, trade unions and employee representatives – is a key leadership skill
- **Engaging.** It is hardly surprising that the four drivers of employee engagement focus so much on communication – for example, setting out business goals, giving people a voice and demonstrating integrity and empathy.

Level 3: Be aware of your organisational responsibilities

Managerial excellence doesn't happen in isolation. It happens when people understand the culture of their organisation, the part they play in it, and when they demonstrate the right behaviours and values to reflect this.

Workplaces often identify 'champions' to set the tone for the way values are brought to life. But it is important for all leaders to have that 'third eye' for how:

- **Policies** and processes are being adhered to: for example, leaders should monitor performance and provide effective interventions to help staff
- **Skills** are being developed: this ranges from ensuring that technical skills develop quickly in light of new technology, to ensuring that colleagues have the right skills for successful customer interactions
- **Values** are being promoted and defended. Acas' seven levers of productivity places a sense of 'fairness' at the heart of individual wellbeing and business success.

Level 4: Strive for those essential characteristics

Every leader will have a unique personal style. Becoming comfortable with this style is perhaps the ultimate leadership challenge, and increases in importance for more senior managers.

But whatever their style, every leader needs to be able to:

- **Trust** and be trusted: a commonly used descriptor for trustworthy leaders is 'ability + benevolence + integrity + predictability'
- Build **resilience** in themselves and their staff: this often comes back to managing change effectively and understanding the first three levels of leadership
- Demonstrate **emotional intelligence** in the way they interact with colleagues and staff – getting involved in coaching and mentoring is a good method here.

The Acas framework for effective leadership is not intended to score managers for their leadership skills or potential, but can be used to offer insight into possible areas for further development. If you have any thoughts on the triangle please send them to policypublications@acas.org.uk.