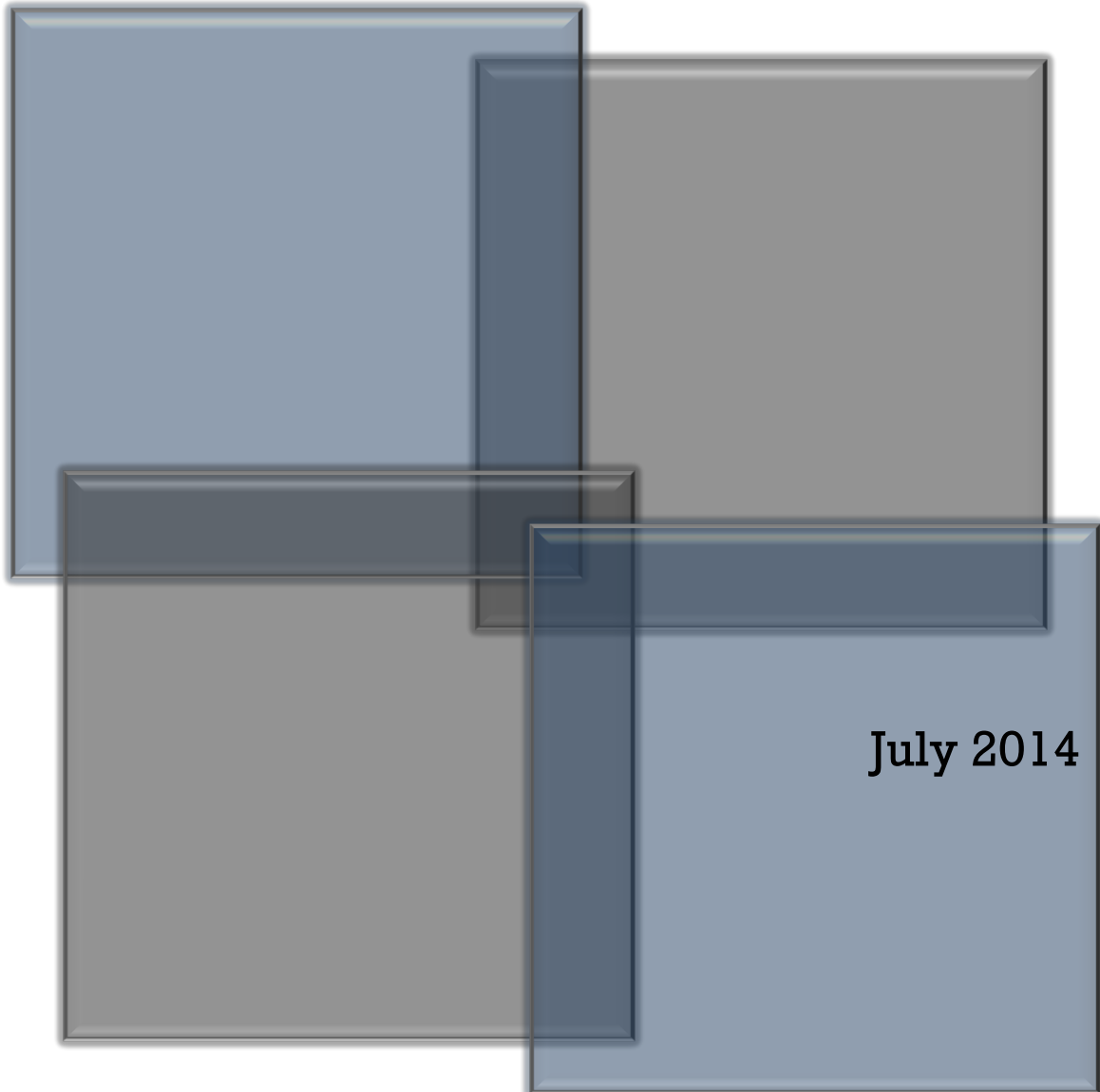


James Scouller

The Four Dimensions of Leadership

**Ideas and tools for releasing your potential
to lead**



Copyright © James Scouller 2014

The Scouller Partnership
www.thescoullerspartnership.co.uk

The Four Dimensions of Leadership

Ideas and tools for releasing your potential to lead

Over the last decade, I've spent thousands of hours in coaching conversations with business leaders as they wrestle with the task of influencing people and improving results. They'd all agree that if they couldn't engage employees' will and enthusiasm, and colleagues didn't see them as competent, their challenge would be immeasurably harder and, frankly, less agreeable. That's why these findings are so eye-catching:

- The 2013 Edelman Trust Barometer's survey of 26,000 people across 26 countries found that *only 20% believe business leaders can correct the big issues facing their industries*. In other words, 80% think their leaders aren't up to the job.¹
- Gallup's State of the Global Workplace 2012 survey reported that *only 13% of employees across 142 countries feel engaged in their work and connected to their company*. It also found that 24% (nearly twice as many) *feel negative and act out their hostility, undermining the work of the engaged minority*. The 63% majority? They don't much care.²

In short, the surveys say business leaders lack credibility, few employees are engaged and even more feel hostile. It's hard to imagine their findings aren't linked. After all, if leaders aren't engaging – that is, connecting with and influencing – employees successfully, is it surprising that people doubt their leaders' ability to address the big issues? Gallup's data in particular should grab our interest because they claim high engagement makes a huge difference to profits and customer ratings. Gallup reports that firms with 9 engaged employees for every 1 hostile person deliver 147% higher earnings per share than competitors.

These low engagement and leader credibility numbers are strange when you consider that companies have invested hundreds of billions of dollars growing leaders these last thirty years.³ Something's going wrong. But what?

Two Unrecognised Issues

Observers have criticised leader education programmes for years. Keeping it simple, their views boil down to three themes. First, poor candidate selection; for example, by mistaking hubris-based confidence for genuine potential. Second, programme design – critics say they are either teaching the wrong things or teaching the wrong way.⁴ Third, company cultures that make it tough for budding leaders to mature by having too few senior executives prepared to champion their growth or being too quick to punish mistakes.

But in the last ten years, having worked with hundreds of business leaders, I've uncovered two more fundamental and perhaps surprising issues. To my knowledge, they've lain unrecognised for decades. I must admit, they affected me when I was a CEO, although I didn't realise at the time. They are that:

- *Few leaders have a clear, practical understanding of what leadership is.*
- *Most leaders don't understand the purpose of their role.*

These two problems are widespread in my experience as a coach, but remarkably no one talks about them. Yet I've come to suspect they are the root of our difficulty in engaging employees and growing the leaders we need. I'll explain why they cause problems before suggesting a new definition of leadership and its implications, which include redefining the leader's role. I'll also offer tools in the form of action questions for leaders to use as they consider their next steps.

What Leaders Believe about Leadership & Their Role

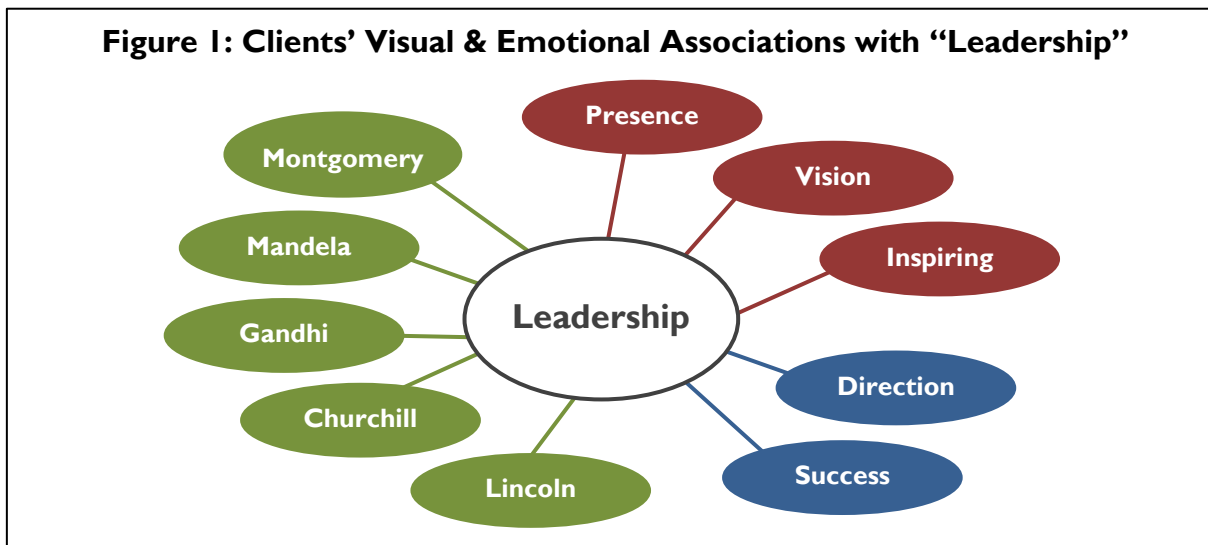
I've often asked business leaders, "What is leadership – what does it mean to you?" Most struggle to define it concisely. Admittedly, some leaders do suggest neat one-liners. One typical

offering was: *“The art of inspiring and empowering others to achieve a common goal.”* While I wouldn’t argue with definitions like this, they don’t guide leaders on what they have to do to lead successfully – they’re not practical or useful.

Yet – and here’s the big point – although most find it hard to define, “leadership” carries great meaning for leaders. I’ve found that, without realising, they all associate the word with powerful ideas and images. It’s these that control the word’s meaning in their minds, not the intellectual definitions I sometimes hear.

thinking this way most clients, without knowing it, create towering, unrealistic expectations of themselves as leaders and the results they should achieve. And by subconsciously comparing themselves against these demanding standards, the vast majority feel subtly inadequate.

Nearly all leaders I’ve worked with suppress this unpleasant feeling, keeping it out of conscious awareness, while appearing outwardly confident. But that doesn’t stop the subconscious comparisons causing fear of failure to creep in. A fear that only grows if they already doubt their



As you’ll see in figure 1, these ideas and images fall into three groups. First, the qualities clients associate with great leaders, like “presence”, “vision” and “inspiring”. Second, words describing what (they believe) great leadership feels like to followers – I hear words like “direction” and “success”. Third, images of great leaders. Names like Lincoln, Churchill, Gandhi, Mandela and Montgomery often crop up.⁵

Looking at figure 1, can you see what this unconscious mental map tells leaders? Hundreds of coaching conversations have taught me it’s this: they see leadership as a major, even heroic, challenge borne by exceptional people with remarkable traits who get impressive results. But that’s not all. When I’ve asked clients, “What’s the role of the leader?” the answer I’ve usually had is, *“To provide leadership”*. Lacking a practical, helpful definition of leadership and the leader’s purpose, they see no real difference between “leadership” and the “leader”. The two words are synonymous in their minds so they assume leadership comes from the leader; that it’s pretty much down to them.

These, I’ve learned, are key insights. By

ability, as many leaders do in my experience. I’ve seen repeatedly that, under pressure, their ability to command their mental state and choose their behaviour – key features of able leaders, in my view – usually shrinks. This reduces their confidence, resilience, skill, wisdom and empathy. And of course their ability to engage employees.

In defining neither leadership nor the purpose of a leader in a clear practical way, I believe we’re allowing an old, intimidating mental model to endure. A model that says *leaders must be exceptional, bear sole responsibility for leadership, achieve impressive results and compare well with great leaders of the past... or else feel inadequate*. A model that’s making it: (1) tougher for leaders to be themselves and more likely to pretend to be someone or something they’re not (2) harder to engage employees (3) more difficult to grow new, able leaders and (4) less likely we’ll see wise, successful leadership until we change our line of thinking.

Seeing Leadership With Fresh Eyes

The trouble is, traditional leader education isn’t helping. Read the many definitions of leadership

and you'll find they usually have one of three defects. They are either partial – for example, they stress the importance of vision and inspiration, but ignore the sweaty, dirt-under-the-fingernails aspect of making things happen. Or instead they are concise and complete, but don't guide leaders in how to do their jobs. Or they are value-laden, rigid and prescriptive; they define how leadership should look in action, cramping leaders' style in a way that won't fit everyone or every business situation.

In the 21st century, it's time we saw leadership with fresh eyes. Here are three new insights to help leaders shatter the old mental model, express themselves, engage employees and improve results. Of these, the first is the key thought as it sets the foundation for the next two ideas:

1. Leadership is a four-dimensional process.
2. Shared leadership is an unavoidable reality.
3. Leaders have a unique purpose.

We'll explore these ideas in the following sections and then, at the end, see how you might apply them in your workplace.

A Four-Dimensional Definition of Leadership

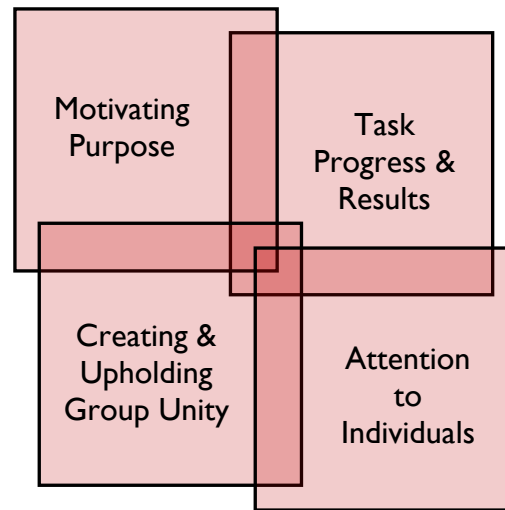
Here is a new practical definition of leadership, which you can see illustrated in figure 2:

Leadership is the process of addressing four dimensions simultaneously:

- (1) Motivating purpose
- (2) Task, progress and results
- (3) Creating and maintaining group unity
- (4) Attention to individuals

Unlike usual definitions, it doesn't just try to capture the essence of leadership, it also highlights the zones to address if you want to deliver leadership. That's important because I find clients focus on Task, Progress & Results and often neglect the other three dimensions. Why? If my experience is typical, it's partly their fear of failure and partly because they don't appreciate how much results depend on Motivating Purpose, Group Unity and Attention to Individuals. So it's a practical definition to help leaders rebalance their attention. That's its advantage. But it's also flexible, not prescriptive. It shows where to place your attention without specifying how to do so.

Figure 2: The Four Dimensions of Leadership



Reproduced from *The Three Levels of Leadership*, James Scouller, 2011

It therefore lets you express your unique character, values and talents in a way that's natural to you.

Dimension #1: Motivating Purpose

Motivating purpose is the first building block of leadership because leadership cannot exist without a sense of shared destination. By definition, leadership involves direction; it means leading and being led somewhere. Leadership without a clear, commonly held, motivating purpose isn't leadership; it's stewardship. Stewardship is the art of making the best of current circumstances, of solving immediate problems, of good administration. Able stewards

cut costs, improve efficiency and solve problems, but they don't move people forward. I'm not criticising executives

who act as stewards rather than leaders – their role is valid – I'm merely pointing out that what they're offering isn't leadership. If the team or company is going nowhere, if there's no shared motivating purpose, no sense of destination; leadership is absent.

A clear motivating purpose is the first step in aligning individuals' efforts and engaging their collective talent. The key word here is "motivating". People must care about the purpose. It must matter to them; it must tap into their values. It must evoke enough desire to take action – and keep going despite obstacles, surprises and disappointments.

The motivating purpose principle applies to movements, multinationals, thirty-person firms, small teams and differing circumstances. Thus, you could state a purpose several ways: as a cause, a vision, a mission, a goal, a strategic intent or an objective. So firms needn't always express their purpose as a long-range vision; turning around a business in crisis can be just as valid a motivating purpose.

However, research into intrinsic motivation (the impetus to act that comes from within, that doesn't need force, pressure or incentives from outside) offers us guidance.⁶ It tells us that for maximum power a motivating purpose should:

- Feel innately worthwhile or significant, perhaps by being distinctive or making a difference, thus promising a sense of fulfilment and pride; and
- Create feelings of connection with other people by perhaps aiming to achieve something beyond the group's or firm's selfish interests; something benefitting others.

I've seen two kinds of powerful motivating purpose. The first addresses an emergency, an unsatisfactory status quo or a worrying trend. An example was an old-fashioned European wallpaper producer's aim to claw its way out of a shrinking market. Its vision was to become "*the leading creative force in wall enhancement systems worldwide, offering radical innovation in customer benefits.*" The second type offers a noble, creative, exciting, inspiring or financial opportunity with no crisis in sight. A famous example was NASA's 1960s mission "*to land a man on the moon and return him safely to the Earth before the decade is out.*"

You'll notice the first example's wording lacked the majestic ring of NASA's mission, but nonetheless it worked. It motivated existing employees and attracted new talent prepared to take a career risk by joining a firm in trouble. Why? Three reasons: they understood the vision, they knew it was real and wanted to be part of it. For behind it lay exciting technology leaps promising more job security, the chance to transform the firm's industry and play a role in an astonishing comeback story. This example highlights a key point: a motivating purpose isn't an empty cliché-ridden statement, relying on slick wordsmithing to make it look impressive. It has substance. It inspires those assigned to achieving it because they understand it, they feel it's just about possible and they want to make it happen.

Bear in mind that a team's or firm's motivating purpose will usually wear out and need replacing. Consider again NASA's mission to place a man

on the moon before the end of the 1960s. After NASA achieved the moon landings it needed a new motivating purpose.

Now you might be thinking, "Surely you can lead firms, teams or groups if the purpose is clear, but not intrinsically motivating to all, because I can think of successful companies who don't have inspiring visions or missions." And you'd be right.

I've seen hundreds of senior executives define goals that appeal to their vanity or please shareholders, but cause junior managers to shrug their shoulders in private. For example, a midsized pharmaceutical firm's executive directors decided their vision was to become a top 100 company on London's stock exchange. In essence, their vision centred on bigness. It offered no direction, didn't say what would be distinctive about the firm and didn't create group unity. However, it did cause pressure to perform, but at a cost. Absenteeism and sickness interfered with operations as stress grew, a mission-critical project overran and managers pointed fingers at one another. It was unpleasant to work there, but the firm's share price rose steadily.

So you can lead without an intrinsic, widely motivating purpose, but expect consequences. For if the purpose isn't innately motivating the leaders must apply force, meaning they have to rely on punishment and reward (known as extrinsic motivators). Why? Because the purpose doesn't tap into intrinsic motivators like a fulfilling sense of mission, a feeling of connection and the chance to express your creativity.

As experienced leaders know, applying force year after year is often exhausting (it demands huge effort and tight control), it may cramp autonomy and creativity (meaning you don't get people's best efforts) and it may increase costs (think incentives and recruitment). Worse, it may trigger hostility, resistance and even sabotage (something I've seen repeatedly, especially in larger firms). It's not that force-based motivation doesn't work, but it brings disadvantages. So you might want to consider these questions: Do you think your purpose will deliver continued excellence? What happens when you hit tough times; will your people support you then? How long can you personally keep this pressure up? And how long do you want to keep it up?

Ultimately, however lofty, noble or mundane your purpose, it must generate enough emotional appeal to move people, to provide motivational fuel for the whole journey. The test question is this: *Does our purpose inspire people to act and always*

give their best? If not, you'll have to rely on force, which you can do, but bear in mind the implications.

You may think the importance of Motivating Purpose to leadership is obvious. But through coaching leaders I've noticed it's a common cause of performance problems – usually because there is no clear, shared purpose or, alternatively, there is, but only a few top executives find it exciting. I believe motivating purpose needs far greater attention than most leaders give it.

Dimension #2: Task, Progress & Results

This is the leadership dimension that dominates most companies' efforts and needs the least explanation. Executives realise that if you don't translate the vision or goal into purposeful action and results, the purpose isn't a purpose, it's just a dream. They know they must ask, "Do we have the right people on board?" They know too they must roll up their sleeves and make it happen. This involves planning, solving problems as they arise, following up on actions and checking for quality and timeliness. And, of course, it includes staying flexible and adjusting plans when failures occur or surprises happen because strategies are never perfect. As they say in the British army, "No plan survives contact with the enemy."

One question I find too few leaders ask in Task, Progress & Results is, "Do we have clear priorities or do we have so many initiatives we're trying to boil the ocean?" Repeatedly, I've seen experienced clients who know deep down they shouldn't do too much at once but still fall into the trap of doing exactly that, causing scattered attention. The risk? Poor execution.

Even though I find this dimension is the most familiar of the four to leaders, the majority find it hard to encourage new, out-of-the-box thinking as they push for results. Indeed, some companies I've worked with define and then mindlessly stick to rigid beliefs (like "this is how you make money in our industry?"), thus suppressing innovation, missing opportunities and making life harder (and more dangerous) for themselves.

Yet the challenge of Task, Progress & Results is to find ways of ensuring creative, fresh thinking as you deliver. Perhaps the simplest solution is to start with a motivating purpose that demands and calls forth your people's ingenuity.

Dimension #3: Creating & Upholding Group Unity

Your challenge in Group Unity is creating and upholding a sense of "we" and "us" while addressing Task, Progress & Results. This involves individuals putting the group's motivating purpose ahead of their selfish interests and supporting one another for a cause that matters more than personal gain. The French call it "esprit de corps"; in English we call it "team spirit" and, on a company-wide scale, a "high performance culture".

I find senior executives pay little attention to building and preserving Group Unity. Many don't even realise it's a key ingredient of leadership. Others, I've found, do see group unity's link with leadership, but think it's an optional extra, a naïve utopian ideal, but not essential to motivation, task, progress and results.

Why is group unity important? Because it makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts; partly by aligning and channelling people's energies towards the common motivating purpose and partly by taking their motivation up another notch. We know from psychological research that when people feel connected to others, when they feel part of something bigger than them, in the service of a worthwhile challenge, it's intrinsically motivating.⁷ That's when $2+2 = 5$.

But unity doesn't just happen by asking people to work under a group banner or getting people to attend meetings. It needs attention and effort. Why? Because unhelpful stuff often happens when people work in groups, like:

- "*Groupthink*", where group members are so concerned with preserving harmony and ducking conflict they avoid critical analysis, overlook important facts and opinions, and agree foolish plans. Consider social psychologist Irving Janis's study of the Bay of Pigs fiasco,⁸ when President Kennedy's advisers didn't voice their objections or withheld important data – data that would have changed the goal or the plan. And the example of the Royal Bank of Scotland's (RBS) takeover of ABN-Amro, which sent it into financial meltdown. Post-disaster reports noted that (CEO) Fred Goodwin's RBS board colleagues, having earlier committed the company to an organic growth strategy, didn't express their doubts about the proposed takeover.⁹
- Or "*social loafing*", where individuals coast through meetings, contributing less work towards the group goal than

they would if they were working alone on their own priorities, causing the group's results to be less than the combined potential of the people there – the 2+2 = 3 effect.

- And, of course, you have the dangers of *hidden agendas, scapegoating, warring cliques* and *destructive conflict*.

My point is that groups exert powerful socio-psychological forces on people, meaning it's foolish to presume group unity will automatically emerge.

Not surprisingly, defining a clear motivating purpose (dimension one) is the first step in *creating* a sense of group unity. But unity (and motivation) takes off when people in the group, team or company willingly impose demanding standards of performance and behaviour on one another through shared values and useful peer pressure. Or through supporting one another in emotionally tough times. Or through sharing knowhow to help one another learn faster. The result? A powerful atmosphere emerges, ensuring that individuals' performance drops are shallower than they would have been otherwise and their peaks are similarly higher than if they'd worked alone.

But leadership also involves *preserving* unity. This means making sure everyone feels included and noticed; that members understand how decisions happen and accept their degree of influence over the group's choices. It also means ensuring that trust builds within the group – mainly by people doing what they'd said they'd do and saying what they're really thinking and feeling, not secretly promoting their self-interests while sabotaging the group's plans. And it means learning to conflict successfully – to face and go beyond disagreements. Only in this way will groups stop unexpressed anger, irritation or resentment going underground, which, if ignored, would probably poison the atmosphere, hurting results.

Clive Woodward, then manager of England's rugby team, and his squad members took great care in building and preserving group unity. Over time, they co-created a "black book" of team atmosphere principles and rules, which new members had to read, accept and live by. It paid off when their six-year journey ended in triumph at the 2003 Rugby World Cup.¹⁰

Much of the focus in building and preserving group unity will be sideways (with colleagues) and downwards (people reporting to team members). But group unity includes managing upwards too. For example, a team I coached worked within a

larger system (the company), so Group Unity included keeping the support of directors who'd commissioned the venture. The same principle applies to senior executives who must keep non-executive board members feeling included and onside.

If leaders ignore this dimension and don't create and uphold a sense of group unity, they'll not only fail to harness a powerful source of support and motivation, they'll risk sowing the seeds of group discord, which can lead to meddling from above, sloppy execution or even sabotage. For if you want great execution of strategy, it's worth recognising that successful implementation has its roots in how enthusiastic the consensus was when the group first decided what to do. This means you should aim for honest, powerful unity when agreeing strategy. And in turn this means checking that when people say "yes", they mean it. And if that causes discomfort or conflict in a meeting, so be it.

Several leaders have told me stories of how they and colleagues have agreed certain actions only to see little or nothing happen afterwards. For reasons they couldn't put their finger on, the group's plans mysteriously unravelled although there'd been no obvious disagreement. However, on further probing, they often admitted they'd heard doubts had been expressed in casual corridor chats. When this happens it usually isn't proof of the leader's weakness. Instead, it shows the danger of failing to achieve genuine group unity.

For example, the CEO of a multi-billion pound packaging firm – a powerful, highly regarded man – wanted to take his company in a new direction. For five years, he and his colleagues had applied a laser-like focus on return on sales (ROS) and its many subsidiaries became so adept at increasing margins they managed to double ROS. But now he wanted to stress ingenuity and innovation. None of his executive directors challenged him in meetings. But behind his back, several questioned his new emphasis. "We're doing fine as we are," was their thinking. What eventually happened? Despite the CEO's power and previous track record, the new direction petered out. It was sabotaged by members of his disunited group; not by active rebellion, but by half-hearted commitment to change.

The point is that group unity isn't an idealistic notion. It's essential to performance; it creates a motivating sense of belonging and team spirit that promotes excellence in the second dimension of task, progress and results. But you and your colleagues have to work at it.

Dimension #4: Attention to Individuals

Heard the sayings, “The team is more important than individuals” and “There’s no ‘I’ in team”? While they’re true, the paradox is that teams are made up of individuals.

This is important – morally and practically. Morally, because if we don’t respect the worth of all human beings (think of the Soviet Union) we risk falling into unfeeling, brutal dictatorship. Practically, because people differ – we’re individual. We have different skills, different levels of confidence and resilience, different ambitions and different private lives. Thus, one size doesn’t fit all if you want to connect with and influence group members and see them perform at their best. We are more likely to feel included, confident and excited about the group’s aims if leaders show they notice us and respect our unique backgrounds, talents and knowhow.

This dimension starts with choosing good people and understanding what makes them tick, their ambitions, how much autonomy they want and what’s worrying them. It continues with giving them chances to feel they’re growing as members and leaders. It also involves facing the tough conversations and, when needed, demanding improved behaviour and performance or, if necessary, firing people. But tough conversations go two ways. They include listening to criticism of you – especially when you need to change your beliefs or behaviour. All this is paying attention to people as individuals. From experience, it’s a part of leadership most executives find hard to do well.

In fact, based on my caseload, I’d say that avoiding honest, frank one-to-one exchanges is the most common behavioural blind spot among leaders – and that includes successful, high-profile CEOs I’ve worked with. I’ve seen repeatedly how avoiding face-to-face honesty (usually by telling only half the story or hiding feelings behind management-speak, leaving unspoken messages) breeds misunderstanding and anger between executives, which then slows progress.

On reading this section CEOs of large firms may think, “This is okay for team leaders, but my business has thousands of employees. I can’t know how every one of them ticks and give them all personal attention!” That’s a fair comment, although some CEOs do try hard to know people’s names, so what’s the answer?

I suggest it’s creating an atmosphere where people feel noticed, included and appreciated. That starts with CEOs’ behaviour around direct reports – as they can’t duck responsibility for paying individual attention to them – and creating

a positive “ripple” effect by example. But they can magnify its impact by being visible; for example, by practising “managing by wandering about” and simply talking to people informally. When clients of mine have experimented with non-scripted wandering and chatting, it’s surprised them how it lifts the climate and starts building feelings of warmth and loyalty in their direction. Indeed, one client changed his image among 250 employees from “*invisible, uninspiring, aloof, cold and uninterested in their welfare*” to “*visible, inspiring, approachable, caring, interested in others’ welfare and better at handling conflict*” in 18 months.

The Interlocking Dimensions

Can you see from this brief outline how all four dimensions interlock and support one another?

- Leadership’s foundation stone is Motivating Purpose.
- But a purpose isn’t truly motivating unless it drives action; which is why addressing Task, Progress and Results is so important.
- Yet action, if it’s to achieve more than propping up the status quo, needs a sense of direction, of destination, which Motivating Purpose brings.
- Motivating Purpose is the starting point for Group Unity, but you have to work at building and preserving a winning climate as team spirit and supercharged, creative cultures don’t emerge without effort.
- Group Unity, in turn, is central to high performance on Task, Progress and Results. Why? Because if you lack unity then, at best, your group won’t meet its potential and, at worst, if cracks appear, you will see delays, mistakes, misunderstandings, infighting and perhaps even sabotage.
- But of course peoples’ ambitions, confidence, resilience and background lives differ so you cannot preserve Group Unity for long without treating them as unique Individuals.

The key message? Successful leadership means balancing your focus on Task, Progress & Results with attention to the other three dimensions. They all matter if you’re to engage people successfully. Indeed, you’ll notice engagement is a theme running through all four dimensions.

To help you apply this four-dimensional view of leadership I’ll include some action questions in this article’s last section, but first we must look at

the remaining two big ideas I listed earlier, starting with shared leadership.

The Reality Of Shared Leadership

I defined leadership as a process of addressing four dimensions. Note the word “process”. It’s important. By “process” I mean a series of choices and actions around defining and achieving a goal. I’ve noticed that when leaders view leadership as a process they usually experience a flash of insight and glimpse a previously hidden truth: that *leadership and the leader are not identical*. They realise that leaders serve the process of leadership, meaning *the “leadership” challenge is bigger than the role or person of “leader”*.

So much bigger, in fact, that any group member who causes change, innovation or progress in the four dimensions is contributing to leadership (the process of addressing the four dimensions). Thus, leadership isn’t the official leader’s exclusive territory. Others can contribute to and therefore share leadership in some measure.

However, I’d go further. Not only *can* others lead, I’d say they *always* share the leadership process. Always. Even Stalin shared leadership with his ministers and officials. Yes, he probably pounded his fist on the meeting room table, intimidating his colleagues, but what happened when they returned to their ministries and far-flung regions? He depended on their knowhow, skill, contacts and goodwill to further whatever they’d decided in the room. He needed their skill and commitment in at least three of the four dimensions (Task Progress & Results, Group Unity, Attention to Individuals) as they worked alongside their people.

There’s a key insight here: leadership isn’t just what happens in, say, a team meeting. It carries on when team members continue the process by influencing their own people. So whether dictatorial leaders like it or not, they share leadership with their colleagues. Yes, they limit people’s freedom and creativity, but they have to share the process.

Why? Two reasons. First, no one person can address all four dimensions alone – there’s too much to do and know. Second, there are too many behaviours involved in leadership (I’ve counted 46) for one person to be good at them all. So it makes sense to use colleagues’ strengths. Indeed, if leaders try to enact all 46 behaviours, it will usually overload them and frustrate those colleagues who are willing and better qualified to lead on certain issues.

Interestingly, although the reality of shared leadership is perhaps obvious, some in my experience dispute it. I’ve found seasoned, thoughtful leaders do recognise they’re sharing leadership with their colleagues. But some who see leadership as more an abstract idea than a felt experience – usually because they haven’t sat in the leader’s hot seat for long enough – struggle with the idea. They view shared leadership as just a thought-provoking, perhaps idealistic notion. However, they’ve usually fallen into the old trap of confusing the leader with the process, which masks the truth of shared leadership.

Shared leadership is clearest if you watch a genuine team in action. As Katzenbach and Smith¹¹ noted after studying high-performance executive teams, it’s often tough to spot the official leader because members share the work. They’re all committed to their goal, they’re all involved in decision-making, problem-solving, planning and execution, and they all support and put pressure on one another. They’re all leading.

The Unique Purpose Of A Leader

Now if leadership (the process of addressing the four dimensions) is shared, meaning anyone can contribute leadership behaviours, this leaves us with two big questions. Does a group need an official leader? If so, what’s the leader’s purpose?

Let’s address the first question. Leadership is always shared, but that doesn’t guarantee successful sharing as unexpected problems can and do arise when people work in groups. Earlier, I mentioned that socio-psychological forces can cause groupthink, social loafing, cliques, diverging agendas, power struggles and scapegoating. These problems are common, so it’s helpful to appoint someone that group members recognise can step in when there’s trouble.

This tees up a response to the second question: what’s the purpose of a leader? The answer is simple. Leaders take on “the buck stops here” responsibility *for making sure there is leadership* – in other words, for making sure the group or firm is addressing all four dimensions.

This isn’t the same as appointing a “boss”. It’s not necessarily about letting one person make all the decisions and give orders. That’s one way of leading, but it doesn’t work well in all conditions. It’s instead about appointing someone who accepts the difficult responsibility of serving the company (or group) by making sure there is leadership. This has two implications.

First, if leaders exist to make sure their group or firm address all four leadership dimensions, *leading is an act of service* and leaders are servants of those they lead. So the “servant-leader” idea is no longer a semi-detached philosophy or ideal; it’s integral to leadership.

Second, it means *leaders don’t have to provide all the leadership* because being brilliant, providing all the answers and giving commands is one way of leading, but it is only one way. They needn’t lead from the front every time and don’t have to tick every box in their firm’s leadership competency checklist. Leaders’ real challenge is not matching some unrealistic ideal, but making sure their group covers all four leadership dimensions. If it doesn’t, it’s their job to intervene in some way; for example, by asking someone better qualified to lead the group in the present circumstances.

Let me give you an example. Imagine a leader, Helen, and her team are flying in a chartered jet above the Pacific Ocean, hundreds of miles from civilisation. And imagine the jet crashes on a desert island, leaving only her and her team members alive. The sun is going down as the battered, bruised survivors gather on the beach, three hundred yards from the plane’s burning wreckage. The leader declares, *“I guess none of us know how long we’ll be here and I’m not experienced in emergencies like this. Have any of you learnt survival skills to keep us alive while we figure out ways to attract attention for a rescue?”* One team member, Alan, steps forward and replies, *“Yes, I was in the Army Reserve and learnt survival techniques.”* *“Okay Alan,”* says the leader, *“you take charge of survival. What do we have to do first?”* This is leadership.

Remember, the leader’s role is to make sure there is leadership (that there’s attention to all four dimensions) and on this island, in that moment, someone else was better qualified to lead. So she delegated leadership of the situation to that person and played a follower role.

But take note of something crucial: *while she delegated leadership of the situation, she did not delegate her responsibility to make sure there is leadership.*

This is where the buck stops. This is the leader’s unique purpose and she cannot give it up while she remains in office. So when the main challenge facing the group changes (and it will), the leader must decide whether to step in and lead personally, or ask someone else to take charge, or consult others, or perhaps instead orchestrate a group decision. Thus, although this article promotes the idea (and reality) of shared leadership, it affirms that one responsibility belongs uniquely to the leader. This is why you could say a leader remains first among equals.

If the leader’s unique purpose to make sure there is leadership is the one responsibility she cannot delegate, how does this work in practice?

Taking the first dimension, Motivating Purpose, as an example, the leader must ensure the group has a sense of destination (perhaps of mission or vision) her colleagues want to achieve. But here’s the big point: the leader needn’t impose her own vision on the group – she doesn’t have to be its sole architect. Descending the mountain like Moses with tablets of stone for followers is one way of leading and it’s one you’ll often see company founders using, but it’s only one way. Another way is to co-create the vision with your colleagues. Yet another is to accept a goal from someone of higher rank. Remember, your role as leader is to make sure there is a motivating purpose – it doesn’t matter if you weren’t its original creator, provided it meets the current issues and motivates you and others.

I’ve noticed that when leaders – especially CEOs – absorb the new four-dimensional definition of leadership and adopt this fresh view of their role, much of their anxiety and tension drains away.

They realise they can let go of their old mental model. They needn’t be the perfect leader with all the brilliance, all the charisma and all the answers. They realise they can draw on colleagues’ wisdom and energy and share the process of leadership, but without forgetting their unique responsibility: to make sure there is leadership.

Applying The Four-Dimensional View Of Leadership

How might you apply the four-dimensional view of leadership immediately? Figure 3 offers a 4D tool with action questions to consider. Although they are CEO questions, most also apply to team leaders and department heads. Remember to approach them knowing you don’t have to supply all the leadership; you just need to make sure there *is* leadership.

With that thought in mind, the tool can help you and your colleagues answer two questions:

- Are we balancing our attention across all four dimensions of leadership?
- Even if we are, do we need to address significant, but previously hidden issues in one or more dimensions?

In reflecting on this article’s ideas you can consider extending the four-square matrix by adding further questions or adapting it to different leader roles, making the tool your own.

Figure 3: A 4D Leadership Tool

<p>Motivating Purpose</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you and your colleagues share a clear, motivating purpose for your organisation, one you all agree on, you all care about and want to realise? If not, what will you do? • Do you all share enough sense of urgency to act now in pursuit of the purpose? If not, what will you do? • In your hearts, do you and your colleagues truly believe in this purpose; do you really think you can make it happen? If not, what has to change? So what is your next step? • What is the evidence that this purpose motivates everyone else in the firm to produce their best efforts? If there isn't any, or there's evidence to the contrary, what are you going to do? • How often (and inventively) are you publicising it? 	<p>Task, Progress & Results</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you sure you're addressing the biggest issues facing the group or firm if you are to achieve the purpose – or is there an unnamed “elephant in the room”? If so, what's your next step? • Do you have a practical action plan spelling out what together you must complete this year and do you all agree with it? Are you sure you all agree? • Have you together listed the assumptions on which your plan rests – and kept them under review? If not, what are you going to do? • What are you doing to create a climate where fresh, creative thinking and skilled execution is normal? Is it working? If not, what will you do? • Do those you are hiring or promoting fit your vision or goal? If not, what has to change?
<p>Group Unity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there a strong sense that people in your group put the collective aim ahead of their selfish interests and that “together we succeed or together we fail” describes the group's spirit? If not, what's getting in the way? What will you do? • How often do you consciously work on improving your sense of togetherness and performance <i>as a group</i>? Do you trust one another's motives? Can you speak openly together and handle conflict? What does this suggest you need to do? • Do you have clear agreed standards of behaviour and performance that you must all uphold to remain in your group? If not, would they help? • Do your firm's <i>real</i> (not fictional) shared values and behavioural norms (i.e. culture) support the purpose? If not, what can and will you do? 	<p>Individual Attention</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do all your direct reports feel included when you're considering goals, plans, ideas, problems and solutions or making decisions as a group? What does this suggest? What will you do next? • Do you understand your direct reports' ambitions, feelings and motivations? If not, what will you do? • Are you happy with each of your direct reports' performance? Is there anything you haven't clearly told them? So what might you have to do? • Are you giving people enough opportunities to grow themselves both in and beyond their roles? • Do people in the wider company feel noticed, included and valued? How do you know? Are you visible? Do you regularly talk to them and walk among them? If not, how will they come to identify with you and support you and your aims? Your next step?

Towards 21st Century Leadership

For decades, two presuppositions underpinned the way executives led firms and business schools taught leaders. First, “everyone knows what leadership is.” Second, “a leader's purpose is clear to all.” But judging by my executive coaching casebook, neither presupposition was true.

I've found that few if any leaders grasp their role's true purpose or see leadership in a way that helps them do their jobs. Instead, their view of leadership is fuzzy and conjures up daunting images of historic figures, exceptional character traits and the results (they think) they must achieve. They also confuse “leadership” with the “leader” and conclude that leadership is down to them, which only heaps on further pressure. Unsurprisingly, given the way they see it, many leaders feel intimidated by their role. Not wanting to fail, they focus largely on Task, Progress & Results while neglecting its other dimensions. If

they also privately fear they're not good enough (as many do in my experience), their anxiety only increases and they act defensively under pressure, making it harder to engage people.

I believe we're seeing these effects in the survey data: employees say few of them feel engaged in their work, with nearly double the number feeling hostile – and they believe business leaders lack credibility.

The stark reality is that despite our efforts to grow leaders and engage peoples' energy and talent, we're getting results we don't want. In my experience, this is because we have allowed an unhelpful mental model to take hold and thus failed to build a solid platform for leaders and their colleagues to offer leadership successfully.

I believe that if we continue allowing leaders to lead and carry on educating future generations without addressing the two basics – the nature of leadership and the leader's purpose – we're building castles on sand.

A way forward, I suggest, is to see *leadership as a process of addressing four dimensions: (1) Motivating Purpose (2) Task, Progress & Results (3) Group Unity (4) Attention to Individuals*. In outlining what each one entails I've stressed that engaging people is central to this view of leadership.

Seeing leadership this way yields a crucial insight: "*leadership*" and "*the leader*" aren't identical. The leader serves the process; *a process that can be – and indeed always is – shared with colleagues*. However, although they share leadership, leaders have one duty they cannot delegate until they leave office: *to ensure there is leadership*. That is, *to make sure their group or firm is addressing all four dimensions*. This is the leader's unique purpose. This is where the buck stops. But how leaders perform their role will be unique to them; there's no ideal or standard way of leading. It depends on their character and talents, the issues they are facing and their colleagues' knowhow, skill and commitment.

Armed with a new understanding of leadership, a sharper view of their unique role and the four-dimensional tool, leaders can shift their thinking and behaviour. Realising they exist to serve those they lead, they can balance their attention across the four dimensions, see the previously hidden issues and, with their colleagues, decide on next steps. When they do, I believe they can win back employees' respect and boost performance.

These insights, I've found, have another, subtler benefit: business leaders start enjoying their role more – especially if they help their colleagues to see leadership through the same four-dimensional lens and grasp the leader's true purpose. They realise they needn't supply all the answers and aren't forced to lead from the front all the time. They can quit pretending to be someone they're not, stop trying to do everything and relax into their role, blending their strengths with colleagues' talents. Without, of course, forgetting the single responsibility they can't delegate: making sure there is leadership.

For too long we've assumed we understood leadership and the purpose of a leader. Surely it's time we revisited what we've forgotten to question and adopted a new, more useful mental model for 21st century leadership.

James Scouller is an executive coach. He specialises in coaching leaders. He is the author of **The Three Levels of Leadership: How to Develop Your Leadership Presence, Knowhow and Skill**. It was in this book that he first described the four dimensions of leadership and the purpose of a leader.
www.thescoullerpартnership.co.uk

References

- ¹ Edelman Trust Barometer 2013, Edelman: www.edelman.com/insights/intellectual-property/trust-2013/.
- ² State of The Global Workplace report, Gallup, 2012: www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/164735/state-global-workplace.aspx
- ³ US businesses alone spent \$13 billion on leadership education in just one year (2012) according to Bersin Associates (*Leadership Development Factbook 2012*, K. O'Leonard & L. Loew, Bersin.com). This suggests that we can reasonably guess that firms around the world spent hundreds of billions of dollars educating leaders in the last 30 years.
- ⁴ Here is the full list of criticisms I have encountered over the years about leader education programmes: "*It's too often a one-time sheep dip; it should be phased over a longer period with between-module practical assignments.*" "*It's too classroom-based.*" "*It's not experiential enough.*" "*There's not enough time for reflection.*" "*Leaders aren't given help in working on limiting beliefs so they remain locked into their old habits.*" "*There's too much teaching and too little on-the-job mentoring and coaching.*" "*It's not tied in enough to the specific challenges we're facing in our business.*" "*The subject of group psychology is too often ignored.*"
- ⁵ Montgomery was a British World War II general who turned around the demoralised Eighth Army in North Africa to defeat Rommel.
- ⁶ Edward Deci, Richard Ryan, Adam Grant and others have led the way in researching intrinsic motivation. Professors Deci and Ryan, in particular, are the creators of *Self-Determination Theory*.
- ⁷ Psychological research confirms the importance of meaningful purpose and a sense of connection or relatedness to others in providing motivation. Indeed, relatedness is one of the three "intrinsic motivators" described by the originators of *Self-Determination Theory*: Edward Deci and Richard Ryan. The importance of meaningful purpose was promoted by Daniel Pink in his book *Drive* (Canongate Books, 2009) and confirmed in research by Adam Grant of Wharton.
- ⁸ *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (2nd ed). I. Janis, Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 1982.
- ⁹ In an article in the Sunday Times, *Fred Goodwin's Fatal Obsession* (8 September 2013), it was noted that although the board had committed itself to organic growth rather than pursuing expensive takeovers, no one formally expressed doubts about the wisdom of acquiring ABN-Amro in 2007. And indeed, two years earlier, *The Failure of the Royal Bank of Scotland*, the Financial Service Authority's official 2011 report into the RBS debacle, referred to "group-think" at board level as one of the reasons it happened (page 229).
- ¹⁰ *Winning*. C. Woodward, Hodder & Stoughton, 2004.
- ¹¹ *The Wisdom of Teams*. J. Katzenbach & D. Smith, HarperBusiness, 1993.