# Reflections on Leadership: The Human Side

Dan Laycock

**“You’re not a leader until you create other leaders.”**

This is a phrase that has stuck with me since the first time I heard it, and I have heard variations of it over the years - as I have become older, it has started to mean more to me.

When I was younger, I did not have the self-awareness to be a leader and, to be honest, I did not have the confidence. That has changed over time as I have become more self-aware, invested in myself and learned from the people and experiences that have shaped me. I have also come to understand that investing in yourself should influence how you invest in others, and that leadership is as much about the people around you as it is about your own development.

I have been fortunate to work with some genuinely great and personable managers during my career. Some of those relationships have continued long beyond the professional relationship that originally brought us together. I know there are people I could pick up the phone to today, ask for advice or just need someone to listen, and they would be there.

I think that says a lot about leadership.

The job changes, people move on and the professional relationship that once connected you may no longer exist, but the impact someone had can remain. I have taken things from those relationships and tried to apply what I learned to my own life and the way I engage with colleagues, customers, suppliers and the people around me.

I have also experienced the opposite.

I have worked with people who were distant and difficult to engage, despite attempts to build a relationship with them. They could sit in the corner, disconnected from the people around them, and then come alive when the spotlight was on them.

By that point, I and sometimes the colleagues around me were no longer invested and, I am sorry to say, sometimes we were no longer particularly interested.

You cannot expect people to engage with your leadership only when you need them to.

Relationships develop over time through the way we interact with people, including the ordinary conversations where there may be no immediate target, opportunity or problem to resolve. Being involved and approachable creates the opportunity to understand people better, and sometimes taking the time to listen or help someone can have an impact that lasts far longer than the conversation itself.

Customers and suppliers are people too, and the relationships we build with them influence how we work together. If we want customers to see us as partners and eventually trusted advisors, being interested in their business has to extend beyond understanding what we can sell to them. It means being involved in the relationship, understanding what they are trying to achieve and allowing the human relationship to develop alongside the commercial one.

That does not mean trying to become everyone's friend. There will always be difficult conversations, different personalities and situations where people disagree. Being personable does not remove any of that, but it can change the relationship within which those conversations take place.

**Authenticity**

Above all, be yourself. Life is too short to be anything else.

Authenticity, to me, is a leadership trait that too often gets overlooked. I mean being authentic in yourself, at home, at work, with people, with the accounts you run or the departments you oversee.

As I have become more self-aware and confident, I have become more comfortable with who I am and what I can contribute. That does not mean I have stopped developing or believe I have everything worked out. Experience continues to shape how I think, and I expect it always will.

There is an honesty that comes with that. In the first paper, I wrote about being honest about the conversations we are and are not having with customers. I think the same principle applies to the human side of leadership.

A leader needs to understand the relationship they actually have with the people around them rather than the relationship they assume exists because of their position. If people are not engaging, there may be a reason. If conversations are not happening, it is worth understanding why. Leadership requires enough self-awareness to consider our own part in that rather than assuming the problem always sits somewhere else.

Being approachable matters here. People need to know they can have a conversation, ask for advice or offer a different view without first having to judge how that conversation will be received.

I have had managers where that felt natural, and those are often the relationships that have lasted.

**Humility and development**

As confidence has grown, I have also learned the importance of humility.

Being a leader does not mean knowing everything, and there will always be people around us with knowledge, experience or perspectives that we do not have. There will also be times when we get something wrong.

Admitting that should be part of leadership.

I would rather work with someone who can acknowledge a mistake and learn from it than someone who feels their position requires them to defend every decision. The same should apply to our own behaviour. Self-awareness only has value if we are prepared to recognise something in ourselves and do something with that understanding.

Taking time to help other people develop is part of that for me. The managers who influenced me most did not give me a template for who I should become. They shared experience, offered advice and gave me the opportunity to develop my own judgement. Some of what they taught me probably came through conversations they would no longer remember, but I remember them because they influenced how I thought or what I did next.

That brings me back to the thought I started with.

**“You’re not a leader until you create other leaders.”**

I understand that differently now than I might have done earlier in my career. Creating leaders does not necessarily mean developing people to manage teams or eventually hold a particular title. It can mean helping someone become more confident in their own judgement and giving them the support to grow into what they are capable of becoming.

The impact of good leadership can therefore extend beyond the time people work together. I know that from the relationships I still have with people who once managed me and from the influence their knowledge and experience continues to have on how I think today.

That is the kind of leadership I value.

**The human side**

In the first paper, I explored process, planning and execution and why I believe consistency is important within a sales team. The process should never become more important than the people using it, and the human side of leadership influences whether that process works in the way it was intended.

Honesty around a forecast is easier when people can have an open conversation about what is really happening. Support is more useful when someone feels comfortable asking for it, and different perspectives are more likely to emerge when people know they can contribute without needing to agree with the person leading the conversation.

Leadership, as I have come to understand it, is shaped through experience and through the people we meet along the way. I know I am more self-aware and confident than I was when I was younger, but much of that development has come from what other people were willing to share with me and the time they were willing to invest.

I have tried to take those lessons and apply them to my own life, while continuing to learn from the people around me.

Be personable with your customers and the people you work with. Be involved in the relationships you build and interested in the people behind them. Be approachable, be prepared to admit when you are wrong and take the time to help people when you can. Above all, be yourself. Life is too short to be anything else.

I know a few people I would describe as real leaders, and the contents and knowledge within this paper are dedicated to them.

They helped shape my understanding of leadership, and if I can take what I learned from them and use it to help others develop in their own way, perhaps that is the point.

You’re not a leader until you create other leaders.