

The changing face of leadership and how to master it

An executive briefing for busy leaders,
HR and L&D professionals



Employee engagement that means business

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The changing face of leadership and how to master it

What's the issue?

Time is the number one barrier to great leadership. Leaders want to lead well but the constant demands on their time create conflict between the urgent and important. This dichotomy is more pronounced than ever - today's pace of change has never been so great. What it takes to be an effective leader and the skills to be one are changing at pace.

Time-poor leaders are preoccupied with winning urgent battles. This comes at the expense of honing their leadership skills to win the war. The urgent question to be answered is where, with limited time, should leadership development be focused to secure the best results? This executive briefing provides insights into that.

Why should you be interested in this briefing?

This briefing provides a shortcut for busy leaders looking to better understand the changing face of leadership. It contains critical insights about what's changing, the skills needed to lead well and how to most effectively acquire them in our fast-moving business environment.

There's loads of information out there about what it takes to be a great leader - if you've got the time to search for it. We know leaders DON'T have that time. That's why we've compiled this briefing.

We've reflected on what we've learned from our work with leaders at some of the world's biggest organisations. We've sifted through the glut of information made publicly available from other credible sources. And, we've extracted the key game-changers and developmental focus areas that, we believe, are the key to equipping leaders with the evolving skills they need to lead effectively in these fast-changing times.

What do we already know and what does it tell us?

Great leadership = more engaged employees = better performance

There's a red thread between leaders, employees and the bottom line. Without engaged leaders, there's no engaged workforce. It makes sense to invest in developing engaging leaders because their impact (or lack of) affects an entire organisation's happiness, health and wealth.

That's why organisations, on average, already invest just over a week's development a year for each of their high-potential leaders.¹ Yet, despite that huge annual investment, leaders, their charges, and their employers are left wanting.

Where to focus leadership development and how to engage leaders in that development becomes, quite literally, the multi-million-dollar question.

Leaders cast a long shadow

Leaders cast a long shadow over an organisation. Their preferences, beliefs, values, language and treatment of people, all shape the behaviour of others. Leaders signal what's important, acceptable and valued, and 'how we do things around here'. They lay the foundations on which an organisation's culture is built.



What have we uncovered?

Game changing business developments

We've identified three game-changing business developments impacting what it means to be an effective and engaging leader today: 1) Digital 2) Diversity and 3) Deluge. Of course, there are more than these three but, as we've already established, time is a leader's most limiting factor, so prioritisation is crucial.

Combined, these three have mutually reinforcing feedback loops, further escalating the rate of change. Directing leadership development to address the impact of these, therefore, has the most transformative impact. We explore all three in further detail in the sections that follow.

Leadership's changing focus

These three game-changers are shifting the skills sets people require in the workplace. What's increasingly needed by leaders are advanced cognitive and social-behaviour skills. These are transferable skills like critical thinking, complex problem solving, creativity and emotional intelligence.²

According to the World Economic Forum, over the next few years the changing face of work will mean more than half all employees will need significant reskilling.³ Leaders will determine how well these people transition through that change and upskill. Yet ongoing research suggests leaders continually fail to engage large swathes of their people.

In a 2019 survey of more than 1,200 employees from Australia, Canada, the UK and USA, less than a quarter described themselves as 'very engaged'.⁴ That's 75% unlikely to go beyond their primary responsibilities. Engagement is a prerequisite to performance and, in these times of accelerated change, it has never been more important for leaders to be able to connect and engage people.

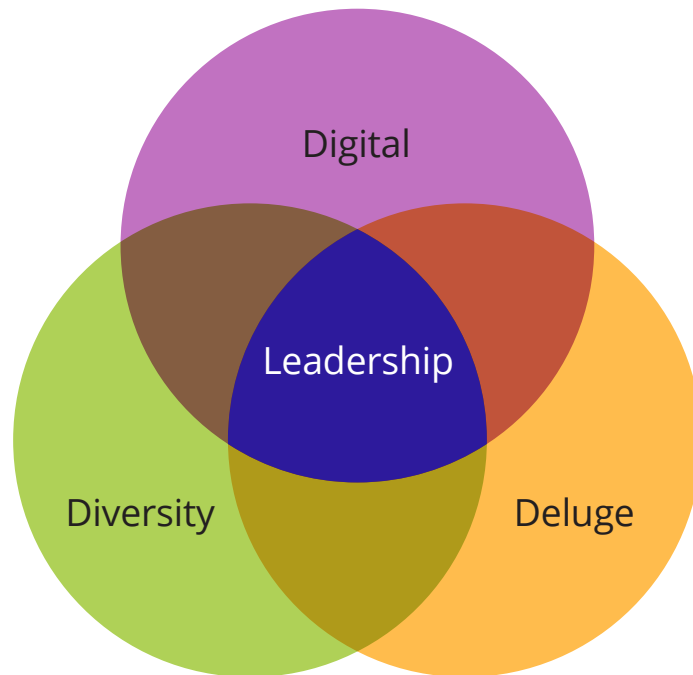
A changed approach to leadership development

The changing face of leadership demands a changed approach to its development. Basically, how leaders learn is as important as what they learn. We explore both in the concluding sections of this briefing.

86% of more than 9,000 respondents to Deloitte's Global Human Capital Trends survey in 2019 believe they must reinvent their ability to learn.⁵

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Three business game changers leaders must master



Leadership game changer 1: Disruption from digital

Digital technologies continue to transform the workplace at pace, creating opportunities for businesses to flourish. According to analysis by PwC, artificial intelligence will lift global GDP by 14% in 2030 – that’s worth about \$15.7 trillion.⁶ But the speed of technological change also brings grave threats. Organisations that fail to adapt and embrace technological developments ultimately fail. Half of the Fortune 500 companies from 2006 no longer exist.⁷ What used to be scale advantage can now be sluggish disadvantage. Technology enables easy market access - small start-ups can quickly become big brands – and what those entrepreneurial successes have in common is ‘technology pulsing through the heart of them’.⁸

Technologies and the smart insights they bring are changing every aspect of business – including the jobs people are doing and the skills they need to do them. Despite ongoing concerns that automation and artificial intelligence will replace people, the World Economic Forum retains a net positive outlook for jobs but stress there will be unprecedented job churn.

To help provide some context to the anticipated scale of churn, resulting from a shift in the division of labour between humans and machines, one set of estimates suggests ‘the displacement of 75 million jobs, with 133 million new roles emerging’. Subsequently the World Economic Forum anticipates 54% of all employees will require significant re- and up-skilling by 2022 – nothing short of, what they term, a “reskilling imperative”.⁹

Digital’s connectivity has also transformed who we work with and where they are. Virtual teams make exciting global collaborations possible, with teams increasingly composed of permanent employees and temporary giggers. Leading such teams requires new skills to successfully build long-distance relationships, navigate differences and dispel uncertainty.

In today’s workplace leaders can’t afford ‘lost in translation’. They need to be understood to ensure their people are engaged and effective – regardless of language, culture, educational attainment or location.

“Research shows that 66% of multi-national companies now rely on virtual team management to help them meet the challenges of geographical expansion, the drive for cost-saving and the growing demand for flexibility in the workplace.”¹⁰

Thomas Sullivan

Professor of leadership skills at Hult International Business School

What’s required is digitally savvy leadership. Leaders need the skills to understand the business impact digital is having now – like how it transforms insight, collaboration, communication and decision making. They also need to be able to anticipate the impact digital might have in the future.

‘It’s about having the right blend of digital understanding and human strengths to lead.’¹¹ It falls to leaders not only to harness new technologies but transition their people to the new digital world of work, while also developing the next generation of digitally savvy leaders.

AI gets a seat in the boardroom

“Hong Kong venture capitalist fund ‘Deep Knowledge Ventures’ credits a single member of its management team with pulling it back from the brink of bankruptcy. But the executive is not a seasoned investment professional, nor even a human being. It is an algorithm known as Vital.”¹²

Nicky Burrige

Contributing writer to the Nikkei Asian Review

For centuries machines have extended the reach of our bodies, but the digital revolution of the twenty-first century is extending the reach of our minds. Machines now have muscle and mental power and that’s forcing us to be more mindful of people, believes futurologist Ray Kurzweil.¹³ ‘Machines mastered the physical in the industrial revolution, in the digital revolution machines are mastering cognitive abilities at an astonishing pace.’ It is this mastery of the cognitive that makes digital a workplace gamechanger according to globally renowned author, Yuval Harari. ‘In the long run’ says Harari, ‘no job will remain absolutely safe from automation. Even artists (and, as per the featured example here, board members) should be put on notice.’¹⁴



The future of work could conceivably be characterised by (wo)man and machine cooperating rather than competing.¹⁵ That would undoubtedly lead to unprecedented competitive advantage, but an organisation’s ability to harness that requires people with the right skills.

The change occurring	The problem it’s causing	The solution for differentiating	The difference it makes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digital technologies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing speed of change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digitally savvy leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better data to make decisions and anticipate change Better tools to enable more collaborative and flexible ways of working Greater competitive advantage

Leadership game changer 2: Disruption from diversity

The composition of the workforce is changing. Successful organisations recognise there's strength in diversity - that a diverse workforce brings new ideas and ways of working to solve today's challenges.

There's a significant correlation between the diversity of executive teams and performance – with gains in above-average profits increasing year-on-year.¹⁶ Simply securing workforce diversity is not enough to positively impact business though – people must also feel included. What's needed are empathetic leaders who aren't focused on diversity labels

but value every individual and give them equal opportunities to thrive. This means leaders need to be able to flex their leadership style to avoid conflict and effectively engage and include the diversity of their teams.

One of the biggest, recent workforce changes is generational. By 2024 about a quarter of the workforce is projected to be over the age of 55 and it's no longer atypical to find plenty still working into their 70s and 80s.¹⁷ Workplace diversity now spans five generations – the opportunities for organisations are endless, the difficulty comes in unlocking all that potential.

Gen Z or iGen or Centennials	Born after 1997
Generation Y or Millennials	Born 1977 to 1997
Generation X	Born 1965 to 1976
Baby Boomers	1946 to 1964
Traditionalists or the Silent Generation	Born before 1946

CHALK charges and their CHEESE chiefs

Each generation possesses different values, cultural contexts, workplace characteristics and expectations. Each thrives in different environments, under different leadership styles. Yet it is boomers, with their preferences for structure and stability, that currently occupy most of today's positions of leadership. Simply put, leaders and those they lead couldn't be more different and, the evidence would suggest, leaders are failing to bridge the generational gap to effectively connect, communicate and collaborate.

Millennials will make up half the world's workforce by 2020,¹⁸ yet recent Gallup research shows 55% of millennials are not engaged at work.¹⁹ Leaders and their organisations are failing to retain and realise the full potential of more than half of their workforce. That's not just impacting today's productivity but also the development of tomorrow's leadership bench.²⁰ And given even the youngest leadership boomers will likely be exiting the workplace by 2025,²¹ bridging today's engagement gap to reach tomorrow's leaders takes on pressing priority.

“Over the next few years there will be a substantive fall in the size of the country's (UK's) current working population of 32 million, with the shortfall only set to increase as baby boomers retire in ever-greater numbers. This situation will inevitably compound a progressively worsening skills crisis across many sectors, but nowhere more than at the senior management level.”²²

Cath Everett

Freelance journalist specialising in workplace, leadership and organisational culture issues

The expression 'people leave bosses not organisations' isn't just anecdotal, the research backs it up. 79% of those who quit their jobs cite 'lack of appreciation' as the reason.²³ Yet what it means to feel appreciated and included at work feels different from generation to generation and person to person. Leaders need to be able to adapt and flex their leadership style to get the best from all those they lead.

Emotionally intelligent leadership helps not just bridge the multigenerational divide but all types of diversity. Indeed, the co-author of Emotional Intelligence 2.0, Travis Bradbury, maintains that 'emotional intelligence is the critical factor that sets star performers apart from the rest of the pack'. He cites that people with average IQs outperform those with the highest IQs 70% of the time.²⁴

Why emotional intelligence matters

*"Of leaders with multiple strengths in emotional self-awareness, 92% had teams with high energy and high performance. Great leaders create a positive emotional climate that encourages motivation and extra effort, and they're the ones with good emotional self-awareness. In sharp contrast, leaders low in emotional self-awareness created negative climates 78% of the time."*²⁵

Daniel Goleman

Psychologist and New York Times best-selling author of the book *Emotional Intelligence*

What's needed is inclusive leadership. Yet the skills required for emotionally intelligent and inclusive leadership are far from abundant in the corporate world. Rupal Kantaria, co-founder of "Mission INCLUDE", surmises leaders "remain far more comfortable using terms that are non-empathetic, labelling things rather than feelings... To build true inclusion and diversity leaders need to be comfortable thinking and talking in human terms... there should be focus on how inclusive leadership makes people feel: collaborative, vibrant, positive, empathetic, caring and kind."²⁶

An organisation's ability to harness the power of diversity is dependent on their leaders having the emotional intelligence skills to create an inclusive culture.

The change occurring	The problem it's causing	The solution for differentiating	The difference it makes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diversity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bridging the gap between different people, perspectives and preferences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inclusive leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better creativity, more ideas, higher productivity and career progression pipelines

Leadership game changer 3: Disruption from deluge

"If you want something done ask a busy person." It's a well-known proverb and one, it seems, organisations all too often act upon. When investigating overload and burnout, Eric Garton, writing in Harvard Business Review, found organisations 'have a tendency to overload the most capable with too much work'.²⁷

Assuming most organisations promote people into leadership positions because they believe them to be most capable – it's hardly surprising that leadership overload is rife.

For today's leader, traditional expectations persist but the pace of change demands new competencies. It is not uncommon for leaders to oversee vast numbers of people and projects. The deluge can be overwhelming, not only for them, but for those they lead, tasked with delivery.

Thanks to a wealth of digital channels and sources, we now have access to staggering amounts of information, providing insight and enabling better decision making. But identifying what's relevant, in a timely way without becoming swamped, is less straight-forward.

The technology-enabled bleed between work and personal life is well documented but when it gets out of kilter it becomes problematic. A Harvard Business School survey found mobile technology showed professionals in the US, Europe and Asia were 'working or monitoring their work' between 80 and 90 hours a week.²⁸

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a 2018 report by CIPD found 'some 28% of senior leaders admitted to finding it difficult to fulfil personal commitments outside work and 29% said the reason for that was the amount of time they spent at work'.²⁹

Leaders and their teams simply don't have enough working hours to contend with everything that competes for their attention. Deluge can quickly lead to disengagement and that is detrimental to productivity.

What's needed is purposeful leadership – leaders who can; visualise the end goal; help others see it, and; guide them towards it. Purpose is about more than profit, it's about understanding an organisation's ultimate reason for being and helping people see how their work helps progress towards this better end state.

Purpose, positivity and performance

"One of my favourite stories is when JFK visited the NASA space centre and he saw a janitor carrying a broom. He walked over and asked what he was doing and the janitor replied, 'Mr President, I'm helping put a man on the moon.' Purpose is that feeling that you are a part of something bigger than yourself, that you are needed and that you have something better ahead to work for."³⁰

Mark Zuckerberg

Facebook Founder, giving Harvard's Commencement Speech, 2017

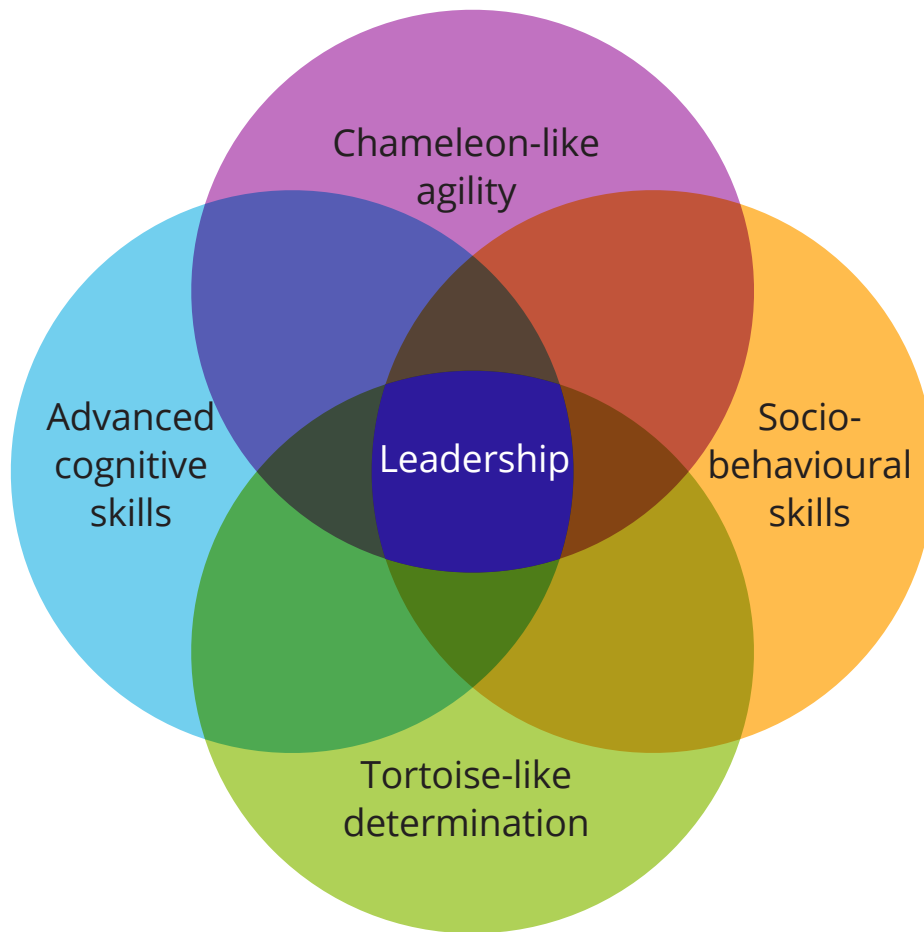
Purpose is critical to job satisfaction regardless of role or seniority. But having a purpose statement isn't enough. Many organisations have an overarching purpose statement but there's often a disconnect between how the seemingly unrelated wealth of day-to-day activities and projects contribute towards it. Today's leaders need the skills to convincingly demonstrate how they and their teams are jointly responsible and empowered to deliver this shared north star. Those that successfully connect people to purpose create focus, free up valuable time and, bring meaning to work. And where purposeful leadership flourishes so does financial performance.³¹

In a noisy, always-on world, where there's more work than time, purpose enables leaders to see the wood for the trees and successfully navigate themselves and their teams through a somewhat dauntingly, dense forest. There's a strong business case for purpose³² but harnessing the power of purpose requires leaders with the skills to see and share the big picture and consistently drive it into everyday activity.

The change occurring	The problem it's causing	The solution for differentiating	The difference it makes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deluge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inability to see the wood for the trees preventing the realisation of full potential 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purposeful leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better at navigating complexity and engaging others to better performance in volatile times

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The skills and qualities successful leaders must possess



The need for Chameleon-like adaptable leadership

Organisations successful at one thing often find it very difficult to think about change. But in an environment of accelerating change, where half of S&P 500 companies are expected to be replaced within a decade,³³ adaptability is the single most important value.

The face of leadership is changing. Organisations need leaders with:

- the clarity of purpose and resilience to cut through the deluge of information and identify what's important
- the adaptability to respond to accelerated change, and
- the emotional intelligence to guide diverse teams towards a moving north star.

It's these digitally savvy, inclusive and purposeful leaders that possess the necessary skills to rapidly adapt to their changing environment.

With these skills and their Chameleon-like agility to adapt their leadership style, they can move beyond defending the one thing their organisation is currently good at, to bring colourful innovation into a fast-changing world.

Why the clever chameleon changes colour

Many assume Chameleons change colour to camouflage themselves. The colour change though is driven primarily as a response to light and temperature stimuli and to communicate.³⁴ The Chameleon is sophisticated at detecting changes to its environment and adapting accordingly. It's this kind of agile adaptability that leaders require in today's business environment of accelerating change.



The need for a tortoise-like determined mindset to learning

The World Economic Forum periodically asks organisations about the 10 leadership skills they most need. For 2020 the predicted skills requirements, in order of demand, are:

1. Complex problem solving
2. Critical thinking
3. Creativity
4. People management
5. Coordinating with others
6. Emotional intelligence
7. Judgement and decision making
8. Service orientation
9. Negotiation
10. Cognitive flexibility

In five years, the importance of creativity has risen quickly up the ranks, and recent evidence suggests it is becoming even more important. Emotional intelligence and cognitive flexibility – didn't even make the list five years ago.³⁵

Organisations need leaders with advanced cognitive and sociobehavioural skills. These skills equip leaders to be resilient and agile in an environment of accelerating change. 'Those with advanced cognitive skills such as complex problem solving and critical thinking, are proven to work more effectively with new technologies. While those with advanced sociobehavioural skills such as teamwork, empathy and conflict resolution are highly demanded because machines can't easily replicate these skills.'³⁶

The how

What skills are learned is critical to personal and organisational success, but perhaps more important is how leaders learn when the skills being demanded are in constant flux.

Digital has already proven to be a catalyst for massive accelerated change and there's every reason to believe this is only the beginning.

Learning then must be ongoing. To be relevant in today's world of work, 'skills development can't be finite or unchangeable – it's a matter of following a lifelong path of learning'.³⁷

"Leaders are made not born", says Carol Dweck, renowned for her work on mindset. 'Those who adopt a growth mindset understand that by continually learning and honing their skills, their overall ability improves. Adversely, those who believe their talents are fixed traits, tend to shy away from new learnings that take them beyond their natural talent zone.'³⁸

In a business environment of accelerating change, where people need to reinvent themselves and continually evolve their skills, the days of leaders relying on an established skillset and repeating previous successes are clearly numbered. Leaders need to be more like the tortoise than the hare in their approach to learning. They can't rely on existing skills with additional learning coming in short, sharp bursts. Rather what's needed is a steady, progressive and growth mindset approach to a lifetime of learning.

How people learn as adults is different to how they learn in the earlier stages of life. But that's not always factored into how learning programmes are designed.³⁹ Indeed, there's much evidence to suggest that traditional learning and development models persist and fail to hit the mark. By way of example, the Global Leadership Forecast 2018 sets out that 'of the 65% of organisations that had high-potential leadership development programmes, 68% of their leaders rated them as less than highly effective, with the relationship between these programmes and outcomes 19% weaker than in 2014.'⁴⁰

The research also asked leaders about their learning preferences. What they want are external perspectives to personal challenges – be it in the form of external; coaches; mentors; workshops; courses, or; seminars.⁴¹

Today's learning preferences are unlikely to be the same as those of tomorrow's leaders. Development then, just like leadership, needs to adapt to meet learning style diversity. The unlock to securing successful leadership is attitudinal – it fosters a growth mindset in today's and tomorrow's leaders for a lifetime of learning and reinvention.



“Digital will be a cascade of ever bigger disruptions. Old jobs will disappear, and new jobs emerge, but new jobs will also rapidly change and vanish. People will need to retrain and reinvent themselves, not just once but many times.”⁴²

Yuval Harari
Globally renowned author of *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus*

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Summary

Leadership's accelerated changing face should interest anyone committed to securing life-long competitive advantage, so if you only take away three things from this briefing:

1: Leadership game changers

1) Digital, 2) Diversity and 3) Deluge. Combined, these have mutually reinforcing feedback loops, further escalating the rate of change. This demands the need for digitally savvy, inclusive and purposeful leaders.

2: Leadership development areas

1) Advanced cognitive and 2) Sociobehavioural. With this skills palette, spanning everything from complex problem solving to emotional intelligence, today's leader is sophisticated at detecting changes to their environment and, with Chameleon-like agility, can adapt their leadership style accordingly.

3: Life-long, growth mindset approach to learning

There's an intrinsic link between leadership and the mindset adopted to learning. Leadership development should be approached more like the tortoise than the hare. It sets off early with the development of tomorrow's leaders. It provides steady access to skills for meeting and beating accelerated workplace transformation. It's inclusive, embracing diverse learning preferences, which vary from generation to generation and person to person.

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End notes

About the authors

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Chris helps organisations achieve their full potential by better engaging, informing, aligning, training and motivating their own people. An award-winning trainer and engagement expert, Chris is the Founder and Managing Director of Axiom. During his 23 years at Axiom's helm, he has worked with business leaders from across many of the world's multinationals. This work has seen him designing and delivering workshops for those at every organisational level. He is much demanded by clients for his high-energy, high-impact and hands-on approach. He is also the author of [How to be a better communicator](#).



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Alex is a storyteller and writer. Employed by internationally loved household brands for two decades, the stories, scripts and soundbites she's sculpted over the years have been seen and heard on the international stage. Her first-hand experience of crisis, change and corporate communications makes her well-placed to share her practical learnings and reflections on how to cut through the noise and be heard.



About Axiom

To successfully change anything in business, you must change people's behaviour. Axiom has spent over two decades helping organisations world-wide to do that. We understand behaviour better than most and have the insights, expertise and experience to help organisations modify and change it to deliver better business results.

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Our passion is helping organisations realise their full potential through their own people. We focus on practical application – inspiring and equipping people with what they need for implementation. This has led to our mobilising entire workforces. Our solutions have engaged, informed, aligned and motivated thousands – from shop floor to top floor.

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