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Seven essential leadership skills: Moving from manager to leader

Making the leap from manager to leader

Training for new managers is often focused around technical ability, but often it's the interpersonal skills and people management activity that is most in need of development. Making the leap to a leadership mindset means better focus on skills like communication, motivation and strategy – something many new managers are left to develop on their own.

According to ILM's Leadership and Management Talent Pipeline research, 93% of employers express concern that low levels of management skills are having a negative impact on their business, with so called 'soft skills' like communication and inspring staff the ones found most lacking. Charles Elvin, chief executive of the Institute of Leadership & Management (ILM), says that businesses should be concerned. "A well-developed and supported manager is an invaluable company asset that can impact on business performance and guide organisations through the current economic climate," he says.

Just 18% of employers expect managers to have management training before being appointed, which suggests that four out of five companies regularly promote people to management roles without any management training – let alone developing their leadership capability. Further research from CIPD also highlights a leadership skills gap in senior management in the UK. The 2012 Learning and Talent Development Survey found that nearly three quarters (72%) of organisations have a deficit in their leadership and management skills.

Whether you've been newly promoted to a management role or need to stand out and make the step up to leadership, ILM can help you get there. Here, we've outlined seven essentials skills you need to take your management to the next level, from better problem solving to thinking more strategically. We also have a wealth of resources available on our website to help you make the leap from manager to leader.

Helen Mayson
Editor, Edge and inspire

1. Improve your problem solving skills

Up your ability to assess complicated issues and come up with solutions with our guide to better problem solving skills

Identify the issue
The first step to solving a problem is identifying the issue and defining what it is, where it's occuring and who it involves. This requires thought and analysis of the problem (or problems) – detecting that there is a problem, identifying the type of problem, and then clearly defining it so it's easy to understand.

Assess the issue
As well as understanding the nature of the problem itself, you need to be clear on the interests of everyone involved. This is the time for active listening – talk to the stakeholders, try to be impartial and identify exactly how the problem is impacting on your team, department or organisation. This is the time to gather facts, which will help you get a full understanding of what the problem is, who it effects and why it causing an issue.

Look for solutions
Now it's time to do some brainstorming. There can be lots of room for creativity here and it's

a chance to get other stakeholders involved in solving the problem. It may be the case that someone has been dying to change the process for years – but has never had the opportunity. Gather ideas, suggestions and thoughts on how to eliminate the issue.

Decide on a course of action
Next, you need to choose one of the options on the table. Pick the option that best suits your business in balance. What's the ultimate organisational goal? Assess each solution against that goal – are you in a cost-cutting phase and looking for a quick, cheap solution to 'patch' the problem, or are you willing to spend more time working on a long-term solution?

Implement your fix
There are two key things to consider when implementing your solution – communication and transparency. Communicate the new solution to your teams and have a clear plan in place on how to put it into practice. Is it going to have a knock on effect to workload? If so, be transparent about it and break down silos between teams or colleagues to get it working effectively. If you've involved your teams in the solution stage earlier on, this should be easier.

Assess the impact
Finally, assess the solution in practice – has it solved the issue completely? If it's only a temporary patch, do you have a plan in place to a longer term solution – and are you working towards it now?

2. Be more results focused

We know that being a great leader means empowering your people to be able to achieve great things. So how do you drive a more results focused team?

Be clear about your organisation's purpose
Purpose is the animating idea that energises, directs and differentiates the business. It sets out what the business exists to do, where it's going, why it matters and what it's good at. It gives it a reason to be that goes beyond the achievement of purely financial goals. A sense of purpose motivates employees, as it helps them align their personal lives with a mission or set of goals that resonate with them. Delivering shareholder value might not seem that exciting to the average employee – being part of a team that delivers a purpose does.

Allow freedom – and accountability
Build relationships with your teams based on trust and avoid micro-managing tasks wherever possible, however tempting it is to get involved. This allows you to spend more time thinking strategically, and your team to have a sense of ownership over their role. Guide staff with a desired (but achievable) outcome – for example,

a 15% reduction in waiting time at a call centre – and allow them to come up with their own solutions to achieve it. This means being available to support staff where needed, but allowing them to achieve tasks in their own way and through their own ideas.

Make goals visible
When you set targets for your team members, make them visible – across your team, across other departments and across the organisation. They must be clear where they stand relative to the overall goals of the organisation, and how their objectives fit into those goals. They might need to work with other departments – if so, briefing other teams on their goals, eg 'Joe is working to reduce call waiting times, which will impact on our customer satisfaction and productivity', means if Joe needs to work with other stakeholders in the group, they are already aware of the project and primed to help.
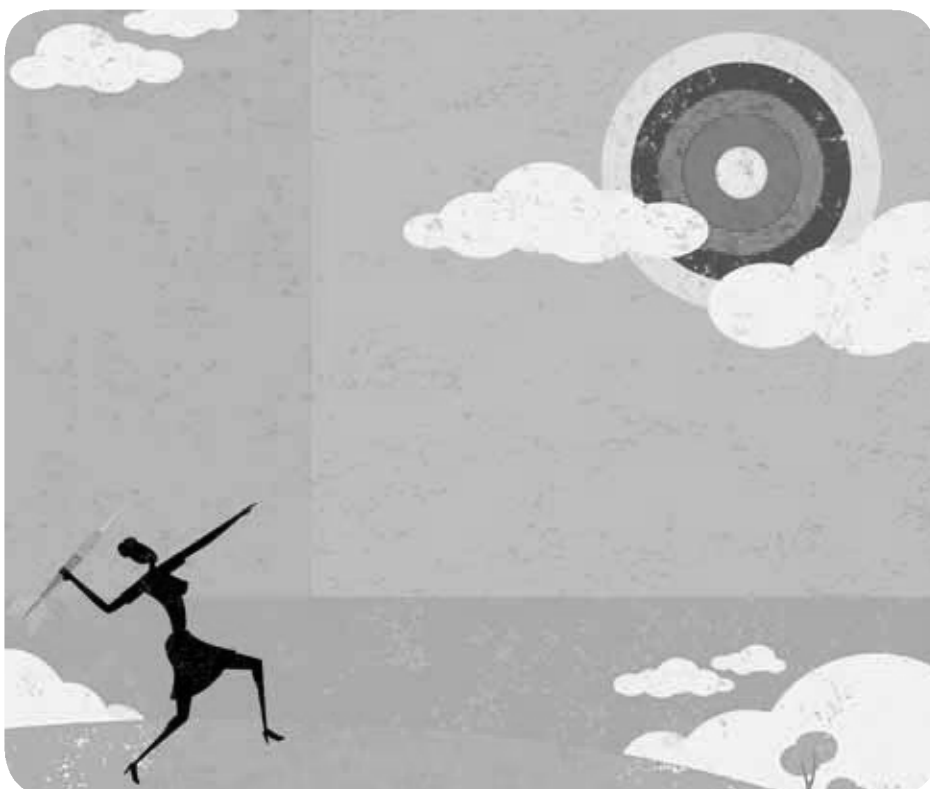
3. Become a better communicator

Communication and interpersonal relationships are one of the key areas where technical experts often find themselves lacking once they've stepped up to a management position. These steps will help improve the way you interact with your teams

Understand your teams

Everyone you work with is different – they all have different drives and motivations, different career goals and different preferred ways of working. Your job as a manager is to get people working to the best of their ability to the goals the organisation has set with them. While technical knowledge is important, the reason most leaders fail are shortcomings in their interpersonal and communication skills.

Enhance self-esteem

The first principle is to maintain or enhance the self-esteem of the people you are interacting with. Outcomes of high levels of self-esteem include high levels of career and job satisfaction; improved motivation and engagement; high-quality work; better personal and professional relationships; and more innovation at work – all outcomes which businesses want to encourage. Praise good work, focus on positives and build on your teams' strongest skills.

Listen and respond with empathy

Leaders who demonstrate empathy with their employees are perceived to be better coaches, while employees who believe their leaders are empathetic tend to be more engaged in their work and less fatigued, depressed and anxious. Research by the Institute for Employment Studies showed that the main reason employees found managers disengaging was a lack of empathy/interest in people. Leaders are seen as more effective when they create a participative and inclusive work environment through active listening and responding.

Involve your team in decisions

For people to be engaged, they need to feel as though their opinions and thoughts matter. At work this translates into leaders and team members reaching out to one another for support and ideas – it's good to talk.

Be transparent

In the workplace, sharing the reasons behind decision-making improves communication between both direct reports and colleagues, and builds a more trusting environment. Trust in leadership is a critical requirement for employees, and this affects overall organisational and work group effectiveness, employee satisfaction with leadership, and innovation.

Allow autonomy, but provide support

Provide your team with support without removing responsibility in order to build ownership. The fact that today's workplace is so interconnected means that it is next to impossible to do a job in isolation. Providing support is a critical role of the manager. When seeking help it is important for the support to come without removing ownership of the task, as this is how we learn and develop on a role. The ability to provide support without removing responsibility is the driving force behind the sense of empowerment, and managers are seen as more effective when they perform supportive behaviours without taking over.
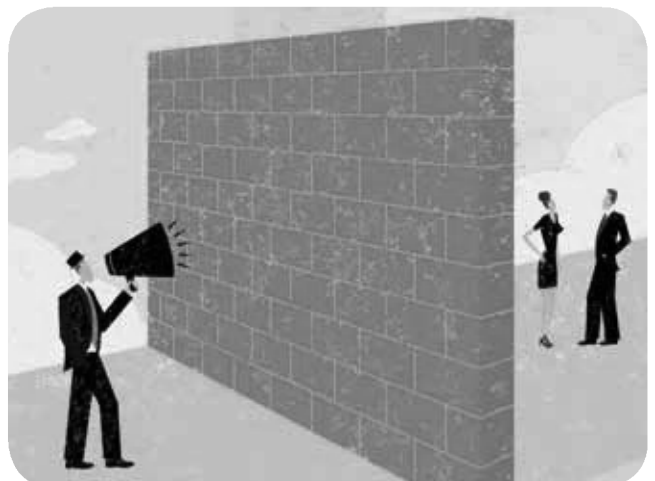
4. Build stronger teams

Want to build a stronger team? The key is to understand that all your employees are different – a one size fits all approach won't work. Here's how to assess them - and then lead them

Discover yourself first
Analysing personality types isn't about putting people in boxes, it's about recognising your own starting point. Once you've done that, you can understand how other people's starting points are different. If you can at least recognise that, you can start to do one or two things differently without changing your personality.

Don't force others to comply
Without self-awareness, you'll try to force others to operate in the way most comfortable to you. Managers tend to recruit in their own image when, actually, what you need is a bit of difference. Don't force your way onto others.

Value diversity
Recognise and value diversity of personality. Diversity in the workplace is not just the obvious – it's the subtle things. One person might need to know detail and another can't stand detail. If they meet up and don't know that about each other, they're going to get pretty frustrated. Both of them may be using their strengths, but overplaying them or using them in the wrong situation, so they're seen as a weakness.

Beware appraisals
Appraisals are a classic process where managers can waste a lot of time trying to get their reports to be more creative, or better problem solvers, when actually their talents might lie somewhere else. Understand your reports' personality type as a starting point, then focus on their strengths, rather than your own.

Opposites attract?
The reason opposite personality types can pose us problems is because they tend to embody everything we reject about ourselves or think we aren't good at. That doesn't mean we don't appreciate the skills they possess, but we don't think these things are of value to us. When those attributes turn up in the workplace personified, conflict can occur, but it can also provide good opportunities for working differently.

The right balance
When profiling a team of people who do the same job function, almost 80% of them will come out in the same place. Whether the job attracts these people or they are shaped by the job is unclear, but it's very common. However, a cross-functional or project team absolutely needs different personality types to ensure that different strengths and weaknesses are balanced and differing views offered.

Notice the clues
Any manager with a good working knowledge of personality types can't help but see the clues, as people leak clues all the time. If you're paying attention to the clues that are being presented, you'll start to notice that people you work with fall into clusters. We play amateur psychologist all the time – these personality profiles give you a safe language in teams where conflict should and does arise.

5. Inspire and motivate

Inspirational leaders are the ones you love working for – they get teams putting in extra effort and embracing their roles. Here's how to inspire and motivate your teams

Show your enthusiasm
You can't be inspired by someone who isn't inspired themselves. Inspirational leaders display passion and enthusiasm for their subject - you don't have to bounce off the walls, but you do have to convey to your teams that you believe in what you're doing. False feelings won't cut it here.

Sell the benefits
Organisational goals are all well and good, but to inspire staff you need to sell the real benefits of what you're doing to them. Your team will ultimately be asking 'what's in it for me?', so you should be ready to answer – whether that's better job security, increased development, greater job satisfaction or better and more available flexible working.

Be a storyteller
Inspirational leaders are able to gather up all the confusing data, assessments, results and goals and create a coherent narrative for their teams.

You can include personal anecdotes, real life examples, customer or team case studies and ultimately illustrate and what it means to you, for your team and for your customers. Bring what you're doing to life.

Get everyone involved
People want to create meaning where they work. Allow your teams the space to contribute ideas, share successes, congratulate others – just generally be involved in what you're doing.

Encourage quirkiness
Your employees won't all like to learn the same way, work the same way or even have the same career aspirations. This also means they will likely all have different hobbies or things they'd like to do outside of work. Take an interest in their outside interests, and encourage sharing and developing of new skills.

6. Lead with integrity

Trust is the glue that binds organisations together – it allows executives to lead employees through change, and teams to work together for a common cause. To nurture that trust, you need to show that you lead with integrity. Here's how to do it

Understand how your thought process works
It is helpful to think of two 'decision makers' at work in your mind. One is conscious, rational and deliberate: we sit down and 'think' a decision through, then make an aware decision. The other is unconscious and automatic. Both, sadly, have their flaws. The rational mind is never quite as rational as we'd like it to be. Hidden behind its careful thinking are usually unquestioned assumptions.

Look at how you view yourself
One basic problem is our view of ourselves. Often people set unrealistically high standards for their behaviour, yet they know this is not really achievable – so they do nothing, stuck between what they think they 'should' be like and what they really want to do. Psychologists call this the Idealized Self, the person we would like to be, but will never fully become. Ask yourself honestly about what you want to do and whether doing so goes against any of your core values.

Scrutinise your values
Values themselves can cause difficulty. Even if we are firm believers in integrity, what exactly do we mean by that? Does it mean transparency or 'never selling out'? Most other admirable-sounding values can be interpreted in subtly different ways. Truth, for example – is that never lying, or does it allow 'white lies' that stop people getting hurt? When making important decisions, you need to have a clear view of what these important words actually mean to you and to your team.

Know what your subconscious is up to
Your subconscious mind can play tricks on you. The best known one is Loss Aversion. Our unconscious mind, due to our survival instinct, is excessively biased to avoid risk. Faced with a decision, it may well give you an uncomfortable feeling. This can be confused with a sense that

you are making a choice that is morally wrong. To unpick this, ask yourself which of your values the decision threatens to violate. If the answer is none, then the feeling is not actually conscience but Loss Aversion at work. Time to sit down and objectively think through if your planned course of action is worth the risk. There's also another phenomenon called Cognitive Ease. This is the opposite of the excessive caution above. When we are in a good mood and something feels like a nice easy option, we can 'go with the flow' without really considering further. A significant decision needs more conscious thought, especially if values are involved – always ask 'does that conflict with my values or the values of the organisation?'.

Quiet your inner voice
Many people have an inner voice that says 'I am not good enough'. This can be mistaken for conscience, but it is not. It's just a piece of debris from childhood. Like an old record, it will just play and play, whatever course of action you take. Challenge it. At least, learn to sift out any positive purpose it has for you (such as protection).

Trust in your decisions
If this all sounds overcomplicated, try not to worry. Good decisions are made every day, by people who have thought through who they are and what they believe, and who understand the biases of their built-in, 'unconscious' mind. Such decisions aren't just 'based on' integrity; they push it out into the world out there, making that world a better place.

7. Start thinking strategically

Shifting from operational to strategic thinking can be tough, particularly when most managers spend the majority of their time dealing with what's directly in front of them. The key reason managers aren't seen as strategic thinkers is often because they are too busy – the urgent and immediate jobs, meetings and emails get first priority, and strategic planning often gets pushed to the back of the to do list. But your industry and competitors are changing at an unprecedented rate, and skipping strategic thinking puts companies at risk of missing the big picture, and along with it, potential innovations, changes and upcoming challenges. Here are six ways you can shift your focus and become a more strategic leader
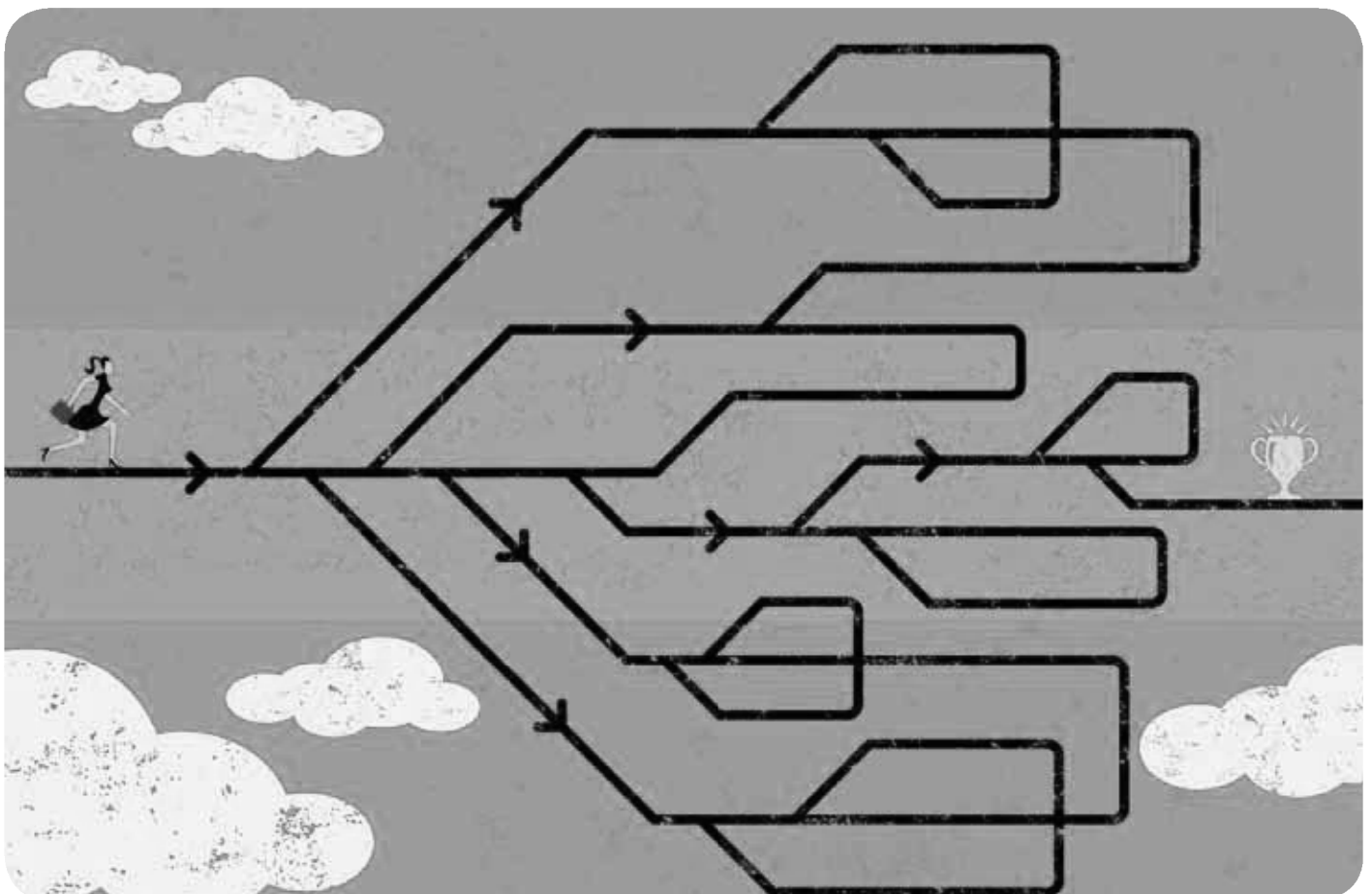
Understand what strategy really is

How often have you heard "our strategy is double digit growth" or "our strategic intent is to be the No.1 player"? Neither of these are actually strategies, they're business goals. Of course any strategy needs to be anchored in an overarching objective. Similarly, strategy can (and should be) anchored in values (eg Coca Cola's "leadership, collaboration, integrity, accountability, passion, diversity, quality") or mission (eg Amazon's "be earth's most customer centric company"). But strategy should guide focused action - what you are doing, how you are going to do it, and what you are not doing.

Look outside your organisation

Strategic leaders look outside of their own organisations to what's going on externally in their sector. What game changing innovations are happening elsewhere, what demographic trends are due to make an impact, and what pitfalls could be on the horizon? Build external networks (both in real life and on social media like Twitter and LinkedIn), get out to events and read widely – it will all help give you a more thorough understanding of the market you're operating in.

Strategy process is useful, but it's not strategy

Many people equate strategy with the annual strategic planning process and its tools such as SWOT assessments, market/competitor analyses, balanced scorecards, strategy offsites, 5-year financial projections, etc. You can have a streamlined strategy process which runs like a well-oiled machine and yet produce poor strategy. The key is to focus on the quality of the inputs and creative "stretch thinking", rather than on how many numbers are generated to great degrees of spurious accuracy.

Question everything

Once you've started this information gathering process, don't just blindly follow the advice you find first. Interpret what you've found, look for patterns and multiple studies or research papers saying the same thing, and question findings. Think critically about things – why exactly does your organisation do things in a certain way? Is it because it's the most effective/cost efficient, or because it's the way it's always been done, caused by organisational bias or fixed mindsets?

Be adaptive

Fuelled by technological advances and internet-enabled social changes, the future actions of customers, competitors, suppliers and regulators are impossible to predict accurately. The concept of "sustainable" competitive advantage is under siege, so the strategic leader needs to be adaptive in their approach. In many industries, change happens so quickly and unexpectedly now that 5-year strategic plans rarely pan out. Some aspects will be better, some worse, and some just different! The true sustainable competitive advantage comes from the ability to adapt your strategy in real time as things emerge, staying focused on the goals rather than any preconceived notions of exactly how they will be achieved. Don't be afraid to reassess and adapt your strategy.

Learn from your successes (and mistakes)

Strategic thinkers value open and honest feedback – so try and encourage it from your teams, peers and senior leaders. Success and failure are incredibly valuable sources of organisational learning, so make sure you encourage regular debriefs after major projects to extract the lessons, celebrate successes when they happen and regularly re-evaluate to see where any improvements can be made.

What next?

Developing the skills needed to make the leap from manager to leader is not an overnight process. Effective management and leadership skills need to be continuously updated and honed in the modern workplace – and that's where the Institute of Leadership & Management (ILM) can help.

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Or get in touch with us:
T: +44 (0) 1543 266896
E: membership@i-l-m.com

Institute of Leadership
& Management
1 Giltspur Street
London EC1A 9DD