



THE PARTNERSHIP

REDEFINING LEADERSHIP

**Exposing  
five key myths**  
in developing  
leadership  
capacity

## Exposing five key myths in developing leadership capacity.

By Josie McLean, the founder of the Partnership, where she works with progressive organisations and senior managers: developing their real leadership capacity to make a difference to the things that matter most.

### INTRODUCTION



#### **Confused and bewildered by the range of leadership development options?**

It would be no surprise, because leadership development is a booming industry. Why? Because we are experiencing such a rapidly changing, turbulent time.

**People are seeking leaders who can help them make sense of such changes,** help them make their own changes and help them develop into the people they would like to be. That's an extraordinary list of requirements to ask of anyone. No wonder many of our leaders are feeling challenged by the task and that they lack the resources to undertake it.

#### **So, how can we help these leaders and the people who work with them?**

This is a question I have been researching and experimenting with for over 10 years. My journey has taken me to Harvard University twice, San Francisco and the far, far north of Australia on a turtle camp with Aboriginal leaders. In developing my own leadership capacity I have learned a great deal that facilitates me assisting others express their leadership about matters they care deeply about.



I speak from personal experience; academic study and PhD research; and the experience of working with hundreds of senior to middle managers from a diverse range of both government and commercial organisations. This has included delivery through both individual executive coaching and group leadership programs – the principles remain unchanged.

**What follows is a summary of five key 'myths' about leadership development** that I have discovered to be untrue ... and the corresponding 'realities' that aid in developing leadership capacity that is powerful in its ability to ignite what is often referred to as transformational change.

#### **As you read them, you may hold dear, a particular idea that I label as a 'myth'.**

I ask you not to dismiss the new idea, but to read on with an open mind.

**Those who are the most powerful leaders are always the ones who are open to new ideas;** new ways of seeing things. Learning and leadership are like two sides of the one coin. Learning about ourselves, others and new situations – learning is always at the heart of excellent leadership capacity.

## Myth #1: Leaders are strong, loud and 'heroic' individuals.

Most leadership development has its foundations in the long enduring myth of the hero leader.

### MYTH # 1



**In this story, the leader is a person who has the answers**, is able to sell the answers to others, accepts responsibility for others and protects followers. The 'hero leader' is a picture of consistency, clear and decisive action, and control. The myth of the hero leader is reinforced by our popular culture including film characters such as Indiana Jones, Batman, James Bond and Robin Hood (only recently joined by Lara Croft).

The 'hero leader' is also most often someone in a position of authority – and in fact the term 'leader' is often used to denote a role or a senior position. So, when thinking about a 'leader', there are often undercurrents of three different archetypes – the warrior, the king and the shepherd.

The power and protection arrangements of these heroic command and control images retain their strong mythic pull... because they are comforting to both hero leader and followers alike.

**The 'hero leader' style is seemingly successful in environments that are relatively simple** and changing slowly. When the environment changes rapidly or is a complex one however, the 'hero leader' is not up to the task.



**We are now post-industrial, internet connected, information rich, and increasingly ecologically concerned – it's not simple – it's complex.** Our interconnectedness is becoming more and more apparent with each passing day. Globalisation in the truest sense is a reality. One person is unable to understand the multiple perspectives required to form a solution to highly complex and inter-related problems.

And, because things are changing so quickly, tried and true solutions are hard to find – they are no longer applicable. Additionally, even if the 'hero leader' was able to formulate solutions to complex challenges, the propensity of people to be 'told' is reducing – it's becoming harder to 'sell' the solution – people want involvement.

**In these increasingly interconnected, rapidly changing and complex times, the 'hero leader' myth may be yearned for – but it is proving increasingly ineffective.**

## Reality #1: Leadership is relational and emergent.

Within this interconnected and complex environment a different type of leadership is required.

### REALITY # 1



**Leadership is now required to be more facilitative than directive; more flexible in thinking and behavioural repertoire;** more able to liberate the best from others in service to the whole; more able to inspire; more able to develop people; more able to envision a better future; and more able to lead genuine change to ensure long term viability.

**The term we have developed to describe this newer type of leadership is 'emergent leadership'.** We use this to capture two facets of this type of leadership. Firstly, it works in the world of the 'unknown' in facilitating answers to challenges we haven't faced before. And so plans are difficult to formulate because experimentation is required to see what will work – this type of leadership works with what is emerging. Secondly, this type of leadership also facilitates the emergence of new ideas and solutions from within people – and so emergent leaders also work in an emergent manner with people. Not 'selling' an answer, or even asking questions to prompt people in certain direction towards the leaders' answers – but genuinely curious and seeking to learn with people.

**In developing leadership therefore, there is a paradigm shift** from the 'hero' leader and 'emergent leadership'.



The 'hero' leader is not 'dead' – strong decisive, clear action orientated leadership is necessary in a crisis for example. And when we have an existing process or understanding of a challenge, that means there is little new learning to be done in order to solve it, most managers can rely upon their authority and more of a 'telling' style to get the job done. But, the 'hero leader' style is over used and many in management roles feel the pressure of expectation (including their own) that they 'should' have the answers.

**Emergent leadership requires a new understanding of how things work** (founded upon an understanding of living systems); advanced interpersonal and communication skills; and personal development to assist them thrive in highly ambiguous environments where they require patience, diplomacy, wisdom and humility. The table below depicts the paradigm shift and suggests the nature of the preparation for leadership.

'Hero Leadership'	'Emergent Leadership'
Knowing the answers	Don't know 'the' answer
Organised and tidy	Messy
Feels in neat and control	Feels chaotic and ambiguous
Decision maker	Facilitator
Strong	Flexible and resilient
Accepts role of protector	Places responsibility appropriately
Tries to impose a future	Liberates the future waiting to emerge

## Myth #2: Leadership and management are the same thing.

Most people and leadership programs confuse leadership with the ‘tools’ of management.

### MYTH # 2



This confusion between management and leadership results in a lack of appreciation of the qualities and indeed skill set of leadership.

Since the “Little” report in early 1990’s that recommended the development of improved management skills, Australia has developed some really good managers – and that is what is seen most frequently in organisations today.

**As a result of this confusion, many leadership development programs focus more upon management tools and scenarios than leadership,** because the developers don’t clearly articulate what leadership is. How can you develop people to do something when you are not clear about what it is? Even many academics are not clear. They discuss the qualities of excellent leaders; behaviours of excellent leaders; include discussions about ethics...



But in my experience with groups of senior and middle managers, when we identify a really thorny issue like “How do I defend my staff member from a CEO or Board Member, who has intervened in a performance issue without really knowing what is going on?... How do I do something about this situation and not lose my own job?” This is a leadership question – not a management question.

**Very few leadership development programs contain a leadership framework** to assist a manager work out what to do and how to do it (and retain their job).

## Reality #2: Leadership is a specific skill set.

Our leadership programs are clear in developing leadership that opens up new possibilities and inspires others to join in to improve things for the greater good.

### REALITY # 2



**Leadership in this sense is a choice.** Any one in any position in an organisation (or within life) can choose to accept the challenge of exercising their leadership at any given time. The opportunities abound everyday! The question is – does the individual care enough to accept the challenge? If the answer is ‘yes’, there are a number of personal ‘resources’ at the disposal of the individual. These include a formal position which may entitle certain privileges; personal qualities or strengths; and the individual’s passion. These may all be deployed in attempting to make interventions that make a difference.

**An important facet of exercising leadership is that it often challenges the status quo or incumbent power dynamics.** If this is the case, exercising leadership requires a political savviness and assistance in developing this ability. Some people have good ideas, but no ability or interest in having the conversation with people who are at odds with their idea. Those exercising leadership need to know how to do this by sharing observations about what needs to change in a manner that will be taken notice of – but not result in offence. It is politically savvy to not ‘stick your neck out’ alone. It is therefore politically savvy to work in a group – or at least to develop alliances. I am not talking about being “Machiavellian”, I am indicating that within a leadership framework, developing strategies about how to progress an issue and stay safe is important.

6.



‘Politics’ is natural a phenomena of group dynamics, reflecting groupings (or factions) due to the different values people hold.

**Another critical facet of leadership is that of creating a shared vision of a better future to use as a source of direction and inspiration.**

I know that ‘vision’ statements sit on many organisational walls. But how many are really understood, in rich detail, throughout the organisation? How many are used in a day to day sense to decide what needs to be done and how? Envisioning is a generative skill that is sadly lacking within our society and it will become more and more important to develop this capability to make the significant changes that issues such as climate change and sustainability (in its broadest sense) will demand.

**Leadership and management are not the same although it is difficult to separate them neatly**

to observe them separately in every day activity. Never-the-less, if we wish to develop people who understand how to envision something better; encourage others to embrace error to innovate our way into a new future; inspire the liberation of the creativity required for this; work with people to give their best...

**Leadership capacity is required. Management skills and tools are necessary but insufficient.**

## Myth #3: It's all about the individual and individual skill development.

Most leadership programs focus only upon building individual capacity in terms of technical skills, relational skills and self-knowledge.

### MYTH # 3



**Individual development is of course foundational, but there is more. Firstly, the individual development is insufficient if it is not accompanied by an understanding of the organisation in a systemic sense.**

Leaders need to be able to think in wholes, not parts to understand what is really going on. This identifies a crucial area of development for the future – understanding the organisation as a living system and being able to lead in an emergent fashion.

**Secondly, the focus upon individuals and the understanding of what and how to develop leadership has been strongly influenced by “Newtonian” thinking**, as indeed nearly all of our society has been influenced. One of the foundational assumptions in this paradigm is that we can understand the whole by understanding the parts. This is called ‘reductionist’ thinking. Organisational performance is often seen as the sum of the performance of each individual. And it is challenging to see beyond this assumption, but we are learning that organisational performance is more than the sum of its parts.



**Developing individuals is a reductionist approach** which is common and often results in people talking about how the leadership program was good, but because the ‘culture’ (read senior management) does not really encourage them to practice what they have learned, they are ‘sucked back into the system’ and nothing much has changed.

**The organisation needs to be prepared for participants to actually exercise their leadership within the organisation after the program.** Leadership often involves challenging the status quo. It is a waste of everyone’s time and effort in delivering a leadership program only to find senior management denying participants the opportunity to influence when they have completed the program. (Read myth # 5).

**Leadership development equips people to lead change. The organisation needs to be prepared for them to do this!**

## Reality #3: Leadership and its development are systemic.

Forward-looking leadership development needs to teach ‘systems thinking’ and demonstrate it.

### REALITY # 3



The capacity that leaders will require in the future is the ability to understand and make system wide interventions. Where complex and linked up problems are concerned, they need skills and understandings that enable them to influence system wide change.

**Given that traditional ‘change management’ processes have a success rate of 70-90% failure** at just the institutional level – the current rate of success with system wide problems is even less impressive. Leaders need new understandings and skills to lead change successfully. I think we could successfully argue that our existing practice in this sphere is woeful – particularly for those changes that are adaptive in nature.

The table below describes the leadership qualities, skills and understanding we know are required for an interconnected future.

Emergent Leadership		
Qualities:	Capabilities:	Understanding of:
Trust	Interpersonal and communication skills	Systems thinking and complexity
Humility		
Patience	Coaching and facilitation skills	Group dynamics
Diplomacy	Developing high performance teams	
Tolerance	Envisioning	Nature and dynamic of change
Observer		
Learner	Intervening systemically	



**In developing these facets of leadership, we have also found it is important for the program delivery to be consistent with its teaching.** This provides powerful role modelling of how to be a person who operates in this way, and so ‘calibrates’ participants - increasing their degree of comfort in dealing with ambiguous and emergent situations. This means that the ‘teaching’ doesn’t look like schoolroom teaching we are used to. It looks and sounds like a large group discussion around central themes.

**Additionally, with some thought in the development stages, the leadership program can be designed to integrate into the organisation, providing learning opportunities for those outside the program too.** This is also an opportunity to ensure senior management are aware of what is being learned, expectations that are being created, and leadership capacity that is lying in wait within the organisation – just waiting for their signal that participants are welcome to start exercising it. This methodology is a systemic approach to leadership development.

## Myth #4: Good development involves identifying and fixing weaknesses.

Most leadership programs start with the premise that development means finding weaknesses and filling this gap in their 'armour'.

### MYTH # 4



Identifying and filling gaps is a deeply socialised mental model that I would not be at all surprised to find you 'reacting' from already.

**From a very young age at school, we have learned that focussing our attention on the 'weak subjects' is what is required.**

But work from the school of positive psychology and people like Marcus Buckingham are clearly showing us this is a myth. When we focus attention upon developing a weakness, we focus a great deal of energy, time (and yes, money) for not much gain.

For example, if you are someone who values harmony, strengthening this 'weakness' (because it will show as a discomfort with conflict) will mean that you may develop from being really terrible at confronting people – to merely bad at it!

Working with weaknesses is also usually energy draining – it is hard work for little return.



**It's not that we should ignore weaknesses – but we can often work around them.**

Recognise those areas where you lack strength, and work with others to compensate for it where ever possible. (This raises another requirement for leadership – that of working in teams). If this is not possible, then an investment of time and energy may be required to develop the 'weakness' if it is preventing the progress desired.

**But any work in developing a weakness, is working against what is inherently authentic** to the individual and consequently is a low 'return on investment' option.

## Reality #4: Leadership based in strengths gives you more bang for your buck.

We see developmental leaps and bounds - and corresponding improvements in outcomes or performance!

### REALITY # 4



**Far preferable, is the strategy of developing strengths.** When people develop in those areas where they already have innate talents, where they already have skill and interest – we see a far greater payoff. We see developmental leaps and bounds – and corresponding improvements in outcomes or performance!

**There are additional benefits to working with strengths.** People feel valued for who they really are – they feel they are able to bring their whole and authentic selves to the table.



This is related to increasing satisfaction at work, not only because they are valued, but also because employing strengths is deeply satisfying in itself. Work place morale and satisfaction should both improve along with levels of performance. There is empirical evidence showing these links.

**From a leadership perspective, working from strengths is also a source of renewable energy...**

## Myth #5: Organisational leadership – one size fits all.

This type of approach is often devoid of thought about why people exercise leadership.

### MYTH # 5



**At a luncheon recently, I sat next to a CEO who upon learning I worked in the field of leadership development, indicated his organisation was now purposefully developing its leadership capacity.** He had chosen some leadership competencies and a program to help tell people in the organisation what these were, with the ambition of generating consistent leadership behaviours. He asked “what do you think about that?”

**I imagine the leadership competencies meet a strategic need and the purpose of the company** – which is sensible, but I never really got the chance to ask. What do I think? This approach is very common and is likely imbued with a number of the myths - such as a lack of distinction between leadership and management and not actively encouraging that development of people authentically.

**Most of all, this type of approach is a ‘one size fits all’ approach,** with an intention of controlling people’s behaviours and is often devoid of thought about why people exercise leadership.



**An Organisational Development Manager told me several weeks ago with great clarity “You can’t change attitudes, but you can change behaviours.** So we focus upon behaviours”.

How? Cognitive behavioural theory is clear that our behaviours are the product of our thinking. So, if a leadership program does not attend to people’s attitudes, how can behaviour be modified? “Carrots and sticks” I would think... The research is clear, people are best motivated intrinsically – not extrinsically. The best from people is not mandated – it is liberated!

**Often in organisations, much time is spent thinking through and instructing people in the ‘what’ and the ‘how’** – but not much time thinking about ‘why’. Leadership development is often no different – lots of instruction about what you should do and how – but thin on the ‘why’.

## Reality #5: Leadership is personal and purposeful – it requires authenticity.

People exercise leadership because they care deeply about something.

### REALITY # 5



**Many programs assume that people will exercise their leadership so that either the company will earn more money (for other people);** or the Minister of a government department will look better. Exercising leadership takes thought, energy and, as previously identified, some risk. People exercise their leadership because they care deeply about something. In this manner it's very personal.

**Organisational leadership certainly needs to align with organisational purpose and aims, but exercising leadership is motivated intrinsically by a person's values and vision of possibilities or purpose.** This is an important conversation to be had within a leadership development program, and within the organisation, if an environment where people really care about what they do is to be nurtured.

What is being discussed here is really the source of the energy that fuels 'great leadership'. **When people are able to recognise and express concern about the things that are dear to them – they liberate their passion to ignite change.** Energy like this is contagious and inspires others.

\* Williamson, M., *A Return to Love*, Harper Paperbacks, 1993 (and used by Nelson Mandela in his inauguration speech in 1994)



**Being authentic can also be challenging.**

For some it is quite challenging to let down the mask; to let go of the 'role of authority' and just be themselves. And as people start to tap into the source of that energy, they may confront another fear. Marianne Williamson\* said it best *"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure."*

If we are powerful beyond measure, then as we observe the world, including our organisations, and see things that need to change to make a better workplace, environment, or community, it is very difficult to deny responsibility to do something about it – to exercise leadership.

**Everyone has this potential at heart. A leadership development program should be ambitious enough to liberate it.**

## Exposing five key myths in developing leadership capacity.

More of the same leadership development from the past, will not get you to where you need to be in the future.

### IN CONCLUSION



**This article could continue for some time yet, identifying more ways in which the leadership paradigm is shifting,** but the essential message to take away is that more of the same leadership development from the past – will not get you to where you need to go in the future. Different (not necessarily new) personal qualities, skills and understandings are required to navigate a more unpredictable and uncertain future.

**In this manner, leadership development is a strategic necessity** because it is required to develop the organisational capacity to ensure the long term relevance and ‘life’ of the organisation.

It is interesting to note that despite the rise of the power and influence of organisations, both nationally and internationally, the average life span of a multinational company is approximately 40 years - half that of the average human in western society.



**In a changing context, organisations need leadership that will remain open minded to the need for adaptation** – witness the lack of leadership expressed by executives and senior managers in auto industry in the US in response to a changing political and social context. It cost them dearly.

**Leadership development programs are crucial to an organisation’s future.** And it is crucial to consider the underpinning assumptions or paradigm, that the program delivers in order to set your potential ‘leaders’ and your organisation up for success.

**Many leadership programs continue to promulgate ideas that were as good as we had in an age gone by, but we now know much more** about people and a future that will be faster and even more complex (if you can imagine that!). You have the opportunity to ensure your leadership development program delivers even more benefit to the people who exercise leadership within your organisation; those who follow them; and those whom your organisation serves.



## THE PARTNERSHIP



Josie McLean is a facilitator and executive coach, who works with senior to middle managers enabling them to be more effective leaders who are capable of liberating the best from themselves and their people – and delivering real change.

### **Background**

Josie is one of the founders of the coaching industry in Australia. Her background includes experience from a diverse working background which encompasses strategic planning in the automotive and finance sectors, credit analysis in a merchant bank as well as operation of a finance company branch and business advisor.

### **Expertise**

Josie's area of expertise is in developing leadership skills through coaching and facilitating practical learning experiences.

Over the past 10 years, Josie has delivered various leadership developmental programs, in the public and private sectors, blue-chip companies, and community organisations as well as working with indigenous leaders.



### **Education and qualifications**

Josie is a life long learner with a passion and joy in continuing to discover new ideas in both formal and informal settings. Her formal qualifications include Bachelor of Economics, University of Adelaide and Graduate Diploma in Management, University of South Australia and Certificate IV Training and Workplace Assessor.

She has studied leadership at Harvard University twice and is currently completing a PhD in organisational sustainability, leadership and change at the University of Adelaide.

### **Can we assist you?**

If you have read this far, it may be that Josie is able to assist you. Either call her or contact her via the 'contact us' page on the website.

If it seems there may be mutual advantage in meeting, Josie offers a complimentary Strategy Session, where you can discuss what you would like to achieve, what your current challenges are and how Josie may be able to assist you.



**THE PARTNERSHIP**

### **Contact Details**

If you would like to receive more information about our programs, please feel free to contact me.

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