THE DEVELOPMENT OF PURPOSEFUL LEADERS PAPER 2: BELIEF

by Mike Pezet

Introduction

Our first paper on the Development of Purposeful Leaders focused on underpinning psychological factors. This second paper shifts focus to programme design, delivery and the programme 'ingredients' which Acorn believe enables learning to transfer into tangible, productive workplace action.

Effective leadership, managerial and executive programmes can help potential leaders become aware of the need to move beyond their habitual, self-reinforcing patterns of behaviour, perception, thought and feeling in order to take purposeful action.

Careful thought should therefore be afforded to programme design and consideration for what will enable people to move from potential to actual leader.

Experience from three decades' working with a client-base spread across diverse industries, Acorn has found the first step for enabling such movement is to understand what influences personal change, as lasting, sustainable change needs to be fuelled by intrinsic motivation.

A useful guide to personal change is Icek Ajzen's *'Theory of Planned Behaviour'* where the strength of a person's intention to change is influenced by three key factors:

- **The culture surrounding the person**
  - The explicit and implicit messages in the surrounding culture, for example, do messages in the culture encourage or discourage change to one's status quo?

- **The influence of others who are 'important' to the person**
  - Support or discouragement of change from those who are influential.
  - It may be family members, work colleagues, informal leaders, etc.
  - 'Important others' exert significant influence on whether someone is willing to try something or not

- **Strength of self-belief**
  - The strength of belief someone has in their own ability to perform the actions in their context

Each of these - **Culture, Important or Influential Others**, and **Belief** - can strengthen, or weaken, transference of intentions into behaviour.

Training programmes affect intentions. A simpler way of looking at intentions is through New Year's Eve resolutions: each New Year's Eve, people form strong intentions to eat less, exercise more, live differently, etc.

Resolve of New Year's resolutions weaken without the fuel of support and encouragement from significant others or from being within a climate where change is expected.

To maintain motivation, strong self-belief is needed and Ajzen et al found that strength of self-belief was the cornerstone for transforming *intention* into *behaviour.* In other words, strong self-belief in the ability to act led to actions that were visible and known.

It is Acorn's experience that to maximise transference requires all three factors to be considered and operationalised.

In this paper, we share our discoveries on what helps strengthen the most vital of the three factors: belief.

Belief

Belief in one's self, in one's ability to try and apply new behaviour is important for learning new skills. As highlighted in our previous paper, beliefs are a powerful determinate of the fixed or growth mindset that everyone holds.

Growth mindsets, according to research in 2017 by Dr Carol Dweck, show that personal qualities of perseverance and appreciation of the role of failure is needed to become competent and confident.

New habits and ways of thinking require time, focus and practice. Changing simple daily habits such as how you put shoes on or the arm on which you wear your watch demonstrate how ingrained and deep habits run.

Integrating and developing competence in new behaviours and ways of thinking can take days or weeks. Overlay that onto something as complicated as developing one's leadership approach and the need for strength of belief and supportive environmental messaging becomes all too apparent if learning is to move beyond the superficial.

How do we strengthen that nebulous thing, Belief?

In conjunction with Ajzen's three key factors, Acorn finds the following structure in programme design and delivery help build Belief:

• Relevance
• Attainable
• Practicality

Relevance

To become actual rather than potential leaders, a person's behaviour, emotion and belief need to shift.

To take that step and take that risk, people need to see the relevance and appreciate how it connects with them and their values.

To affect someone's willingness to try something new or unfamiliar, the 'why's' and 'what's' need to be clear and unambiguous.

Relevance occurs through co-creating clear, meaningful, personalised development goals and one widely accepted approach is the use of 360° feedback reports.

However, 360° reports can also raise more questions than answers through vague, generalised comments or measures. Translating generalised feedback into clear and meaningful development goals takes skill.

Acorn finds a reiterative process helps participants crystallise clear development goals with meaning for both themselves and their organisation. That process occurs through:

- Initial goal setting through well contracted discussions between participant, line manager and development coach.
- Coach and participant converting development goals into measurable behavioural actions that operationalise programme objectives and learning.
- The use of peers and reports in a social systems approach to test the relevance of desired development goals.

In any programme people are at different developmental stages. Whilst goals and challenges will be relevant to each and their unique context, they can still - *using the above stages* - be aligned with organisational needs. Such approaches, in Acorn's experience, create relevance, enable ownership and facilitate change.

Relevance - in summary:

- Personalises the purpose and case for change.
- Comes from dialogue that understands the relationship between individual and organisational needs.
- Strengthens the motivation and sustainability needed for developing one's self.

Attainability

If something is attainable it is possible to achieve, and well-formed goals help translate ambiguous intentions or wishes into attainable actions. However, development goals, despite strong face value, are often vague, for example *'be a better leader', 'think more strategically'* or *'influence more effectively'.*

Edwin Locke (1968) believed that whilst ambitious goals provide overall direction, they also needed to be clear, specific, and felt to be obtainable within someone's skill set in order to motivate action.

Acorn has found that translating aspirational desires requires participants and coach to create specific, measurable, workplace actions, for example:

- **Aspirational Goal:** *"To visit our sites more often and connect with people"*
- **Specific Action:** *"How successfully am I booking time in my diary to regularly visit sites in order to strengthen my understanding of site managers challenges and support joint problem solving?"* (Specific, frequent actions that can be translated into the workplace to achieve the higher order goal)

Or

- **Aspirational Goal:** *"To get the team to take accountability"*
- **Specific Action:** *"How successfully am I meeting Melanie weekly to discuss the job and ensure we are 100% on the same page, as well as develop her awareness of what is required of her role, her skills and her confidence levels?"* (Specific actions to achieve the higher order goal)

A common aspirational goal Acorn encounters is the ambiguous term *'to work more strategically'.*

No matter what the participant's organisational leadership level may be, the purpose of working strategically remains the same; to pro-actively maintain a horizon focus.

However, actions for working strategically vary according to the level of leadership, for example:

The measurable actions of an Area Manager wanting to 'work more strategically' became:

- *"How successfully am I visiting between 5 and 2 sites a month, to have open, informal conversations with site staff in order to build relationships and identify problems before they become issues?"*

The measurable actions of an Organisational Director wanting to 'work more strategically' became:

- *"How successfully am I scanning the environment on a fortnightly basis for key trends within the business and in the market place and discussing the likely impact of them upon our market place/clients with divisional directors in order to determine potential actions?"*

Goals that are clear, relevant to a person's position in the organisation and transferable support the belief that both short- and long-term goals are achievable. A side benefit is the upskilling of participants in defining clear development goals for themselves and reports.

Attainability also relates to accessible programme content and Acorn's experience is that the workshop group is a powerful conduit for translating leadership concepts, be it time management, influencing etc., into workplace meaning.

Such approaches require a shift from 'trainer as expert' to 'trainer as facilitator'.

The emphasis being on discussion and exploration to test the validity and usefulness of concepts in their own context.

Attainability - in summary:

- Fuels motivation and belief by creating possibility.
- Strengthens belief by the transformation of aspirational goals into practical, measurable actions that can be seen, visualised as possible.
- Strengthens beliefs though peer assessment of relevance and value.

Practicality

According to Morgan McCall et al at the Centre for Creative Leadership:

- 70% of a person's learning at work is experience-based, internal reflection.
- 20% of learning is from interacting with fellow employees.
- 10% is the result of formal training and reading.

The actual experience of doing, rather than theory, is key for integrated learning.

Practicality strengthens belief: if people don't believe they can practically apply the learning, then motivation and learning become superficial.

As illustrated earlier, belief can be bolstered through reducing ambiguity and developing clear, transferable goals which link short-term actions to long-term aspirations. However, the propensity to focus on weaknesses interferes with practical application.

Our experience is that significant change builds from small, practical steps that build from - and on - strengths.

Through solution focused principles, goals turn into incremental behavioural steps. Each developmental step grows from what has worked before. Progression generates the momentum for success and positive feedback, which when combined, strengthen belief in one's capability and clarity of what those strengths are.

A further method of employing that 70% of learning is through business improvement projects.

Business improvement projects can provide a challenging and effective vehicle to enable people to develop leadership qualities specific to themselves, whilst also delivering a benefit for the business.

In all organisations there is no shortage of those who tell others what 'ought', 'should' or 'needs' to be improved. However, few have the courage to act. An overarching purpose of business projects is the realisation that whilst many find it easy to complain, it takes leadership to act.

Business improvement projects offer a vast array of learning, be it stakeholder mapping skills, political skills, scoping skills, selling skills, skills of attracting sponsors, to name a few.

The type of project and its scope can vary depending on participants level of leadership. Senior managers may be strategic in nature and cross organisational boundaries. Those in the early stages of leadership, perhaps learning to lead others, might focus on improvements within their sphere of influence.

No matter the level of participants, business improvement projects require practical skills and the practical application of leadership to generate momentum, to create success.

Practicality - in summary:

- Practical experience and considered reflection build efficacy and belief.
- Requires concepts to be translated and practically applied.
- Leadership is practical: it is applied, it affects the work system.
- Belief builds through practical application.

Summary

Henry Ford was reputed to have said, *"whether you think you can, or whether you think you can't, you're probably right"* and this paper has explored the theme of Belief and what, in Acorn's experience, can help strengthen and build it.

The importance of Belief for sustaining motivation and longer-term resilience cannot be underestimated nor neglected in leadership programme design and delivery.

Reference List

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About the author

Mike Pezet is a highly experienced and talented coaching and development consultant. A visiting Teaching Fellow with Lancaster University Management School, he is an Accredited Executive Coach, Action Learning Facilitator and trainer in Organisational Transactional Analysis. He has over 20 years' experience of designing and delivering change programmes and leadership assessment centres.

Mike works with both board level personnel through to those beginning to learn how they can deliver performance through others. He employs a range of interventional approaches which, combined with his practical and engaging style, make him a highly valued, innovative and effective consultant. Mike is also a published author with works of Effective Feedback and the use of coaching for reflective learning.

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