How to become the type of leader that enables people to do their "best work"

There are many qualities in humans that we under-value or that we try to suffocate because they don't fit with a rather narrow perspective on what has value and what doesn't at work. For instance, until recently, any show of emotion in the workplace was considered unprofessional.

Temps de lecture : minute

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This is an adapted book extract from <u>Punks in Suits</u> by Blaire Palmer.

We are now starting to understand that shows of emotion at work have value and that, for some people their special talent is their emotional intelligence. The best leaders adapt their leadership approach to make room for those people to do what they do best, maybe by giving them roles managing others or training them as internal coaches or mentors.

However, the range of qualities and skills we recognise as 'talents' is still rather limited. We want great listeners and empathetic co-workers, but when their emotions bubble up as frustration or anger we'd like them to tone it down. We say we want diversity of all kinds, but we worry about people being 'too different' and risking the comfortable team unity that we've created. We want critical thinkers and innovators but we don't want people to find too many faults or have too many ideas.

For this reason, many people hold back something of their value for fear of being 'too much'. They dilute themselves and can end up feeling that

they are nothing special, or that nothing they have to offer is valued.

However, as we move towards organisations where nonhuman and human employees work side by side, we need to think differently about talent. If people can't come and do their best work, bringing every talent they have to that endeavour, then we aren't getting maximum value from them. If people can't develop their talents, or if they keep their talents hidden, it is possible that a bot could do their job. It is the very complexity that humans bring to work that differentiates them from AI.

Today's leaders must create an environment where people can do their best work, and that includes helping them develop all their talents. Growth and development are critical parts of that. If a person can't grow, their talent is stunted, and if they can't bring their talent to their work, you can't do your job. You don't have all the answers in every situation. You need people in the organisation who can draw on their talent to solve problems that you can't, in pursuit of the mission or purpose of the organisation.

Does your style of leadership today liberate the talent of people around you or limit it? Are you dedicated to helping them become the best they can be, or are you a barrier to that? Does your ego insist that you have to be 'the best', or can it embrace others being better than you?

Do you create space for people's talents to be taken to their maximum? This includes your own talents. And do you wonder, as I describe this type of leadership, whether this is where your talents lie?

We need to untangle leadership from seniority, experience, and technical expertise. The kind of leaders we need today may not have the seniority, or the experience or the technical expertise of 'leaders' in days gone by. Just because you are senior doesn't automatically make you talented in the areas I'm describing here.

The kind of leaders we need may not have exceptional technical expertise. Certainly, they may not be as talented as the people around them in this way, but what they have is a particular talent for creating an environment where people can come and do their best work in pursuit of the mission or purpose of the organisation.

Leadership has become a status symbol, but the kind of leadership I'm describing isn't necessarily high status. There isn't necessarily a lot of glory in it. In creating space for others to do their best work, you might not get the credit. It is others who will shine. The difference that this kind of leader makes is greater than any one individual contributor can make because this kind of leader looks for the barriers that are stopping people doing their best work, finding ways to remove those barriers and liberate their talent. That's where its meaning comes from, and that requires a set of talents which have been vastly undervalued in the working world. Until now.

'Best work' also means the best ideas and best decisions

Part of liberating people's talent so they can do their best work is enabling the best thinking.

Until now, we've associated leadership with being the creator of the vision, that somehow the leader is the originator of the vision. This assumes that the leader always knows the best thing to do, the best decision, the best direction to go. That might not be the case. Instead, they might be the enablers of other people's ideas, their role being to create a space where others can create and innovate.

What are the barriers to 'best ideas' and 'best decisions' in your organisation? Do people have time and space to generate the best ideas? Do they have access to information and expertise? Does the culture

support people taking this kind of initiative? Who is making the decisions? Is it the right people? What criteria do people use to make those decisions? Do those decisions take the organisation towards the mission or purpose, and are they in alignment with the ethos of the organisation or not?

As you start to ask these questions, other people will start as well. This is the multiplier effect of leadership. Your curiosity not only leads to better ideas and better decision-making, but to deeper curiosity and a willingness by others to move towards tensions. Your leadership creates more leadership rather than more followership.

'Best work' also means embracing the humanity of humans

Ultimately, people can't do their best work in an inhumane environment. Can people bring their humanity to serve the bigger purpose or mission? If they can't, you aren't getting their best.

If people can't bring their humanity, it means that better ideas, better solutions and better implementation are out there somewhere, but outside of your grasp. If you're getting 60% of what people have to offer because they are unable to bring their whole selves to work, you're not getting their best contribution.

Does the physical environment in which people work enable them to bring their full humanity? Does the psychological environment enable people to bring their full humanity? Is it safe to be themselves? Is difference valued? Does the organisation embrace emotion? Are people treated humanely or like second-rate machines? Can people connect with themselves, with each other, with the customer or client? Can they afford to care?

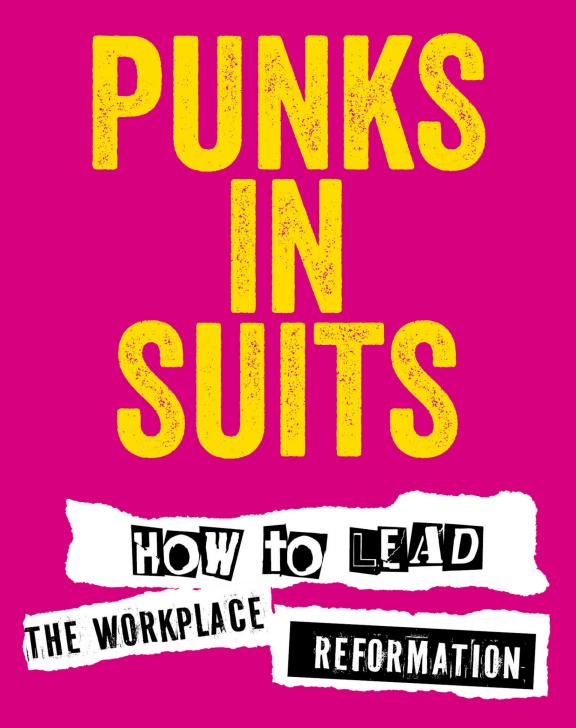We've never really dedicated ourselves to creating this kind of

environment and therefore we've never really needed leaders to care about the humane-ity of the environment. We've never really needed leaders who were tuned in to whether the environment was humane. In a leader's back pocket were always the tools to control. The leader was always able to say, 'If needs be, I can just make this happen. Because I am the boss.'

There will be situations where, not because you are the boss but because you have decision-making authority in a particular situation (because of a role you have in the organisation), you will be the one to make a final call. But the authority to make a decision isn't bound up with leadership. It is a separate authority that comes from your expertise or your experience. Decision-making authority doesn't have to sit with the 'boss'. There doesn't even need to be a boss. It can be distributed to the best person or people to make that decision. Sometimes that will be you, but it isn't you simply by virtue of your role. A leader's authority doesn't come from a job title or positional power. Leadership is in the eye of the beholder. The only question you have to ask is: "Is that the kind of leader I have the talent to become?"

Blaire Palmer is a former BBC journalist turned keynote speaker on the future of leadership and work and the author of _Punks in Suits_.

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understand the signal and succeed in tomorrow's world.'

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Article by Blaire Palmer