

30 years on: what good leadership looks like

Hierarchical power is rare these days. Today's leaders need be able to engender psychological safety and collaboration

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Look back 30 years to the days when LBS launched its [Accelerated Development Programme \(ADP\)](#), and organisations – both in the private and public sectors – were hugely different from today.

Moves to simplify and flatten management structures were already underway, but still, a typical organisation would have hierarchies composed of layer upon layer stretching from top to bottom. From an individual's point of view, promotion was likely to come in small steps – often helped by a mentor or sponsor who was also making their own plodding journey up through the ranks.

“In the old days – and let's call 1989 the old days – not having the right kind of mentor to shepherd someone through the organisation could be fatal for the career of an ambitious individual,” says [Randall S Peterson](#), Professor of Organisational Behaviour at LBS and Academic Director of the [Leadership Institute](#).

“In those hierarchical structures, each step was small, but with the right person looking after you, you could make those frequent small steps upwards. When people were getting regular promotions, that was simple. “No longer. That is virtually never the case these days. As the number of layers of management has been reduced and hierarchies have been flattened, steps are fewer but each is massive.”

The idea that layers of management could be reduced was not brand new in 1989, but it was a key element of thinking about how to make organisations function better and more efficiently. “It really gained traction and actually happened on a large scale only in the 1990s and 2000s,” says Petersen. “Now, fewer layers mean that each individual is likely to have more people reporting to them.

“And that presents its own issues. How can a manager really supervise a large number of people effectively? He or she can't. But if the people they appoint share their values, then the manager can essentially say, 'I can't manage, supervise, coach and advise everyone under me because I have, say, 12 people reporting directly to me. It's impossible. But if I know that those people share my values - my world view, then I can let them get on with it.'

Again, the idea wasn't brand new in 1989, but it was a hot idea and began to be absorbed by organisations which then started a race over the following decades to see how much middle management could be stripped out.”

And now? Says Petersen: “It is an idea that has come and has now probably run its course. You can cut from fat into muscle and into bone. It was a great idea, and it was right to do it in order to cut costs and overheads, but in certain areas, it has possibly gone too far.

“Nowadays, we have moved to other things. It used to be the case that having access to – and withholding – information was a way of demonstrating power. But in 2019, everyone has access to much the same information: it's at their fingertips on their desktop or on their phone. In any case, we are now drowning in information: in 1989, we felt we needed as much as possible; now the crucial thing is knowing how to evaluate and interpret what we have.

“Instead, collaboration is the key. You no longer have hierarchical power. So how do you encourage collaboration? First, it can be facilitated by nurturing a culture of psychological safety where people feel that they can say what they really think.

“And second, it comes from encouraging curiosity. So when something new comes over the horizon, don't say 'There's something unfamiliar here; it's not in my job description so I'll walk away from it.' Instead the approach should be, 'let's look at this; it could be interesting.' And that's essential in today's environment of huge complexity - much more so than it was when the ADP was launched.

“Going back to 1989, the idea of an individual's “social capital” – their behavioural assets – was on the radar, but it wasn't big. Now, it very much the thing. Social capital is the ability to influence and persuade, to encourage people to do things for themselves rather than mechanically performing a task they have been given. And, of course, a key requirement of good leadership is an ability to manage conflict, not by crushing dissent but by encouraging the acceptance of a diversity of views.

“Simply saying the majority is right and that people in the minority have to swallow the consequences is a bad idea. In small organisations and big ones, simple, unmediated majority rule is associated with teams that are unhappy and perform badly. Would considerations such as this have been a big part of what ADP students were learning in 1989? I doubt it.”

Approaching the third decade of the second millennium, all these elements – the challenges of working in organisations that are less hierarchical, the imperative to collaborate and a willingness to explore unexpected and unfamiliar things - tie together: they are vital components of the ADP, helping participants and alumni to thrive in an environment that would have been virtually unrecognisable 30 years ago. Just as the world has changed, so has the ADP, giving insights and providing skills that are appropriate for working in today's world.

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