Managing Distributed Teams using Socially Embedded Leadership

In 2004, Kristine Peters first presented the *building layers of capacity* model for leadership development. This concept formed the basis of her PhD research, which developed the concept of Socially Embedded Leadership (2012).

Initially focused on changing attitudes and environmental practices in small business, Socially Embedded Leadership is a practical tool for engaging distributed teams in small and large organisations - based on two concepts:

1. Teaching HOW

2. Seeding WHAT

Let's start at the beginning

When we look at a 'team', whether it be a small business, a unit within our organisation, or an affiliate group of volunteers - what do we see?

We're people, so the first thing we see is the 'people' side of things: are they friendly, are they behaving in a way that we consider 'normal', are they interesting and inspiring. Human beings are funny creatures, if they like someone they attribute greater skills and abilities (ability to manage others, strategic thinking, time management) than might really be the case. If someone is speaking up, our first impression is that they must know what they're talking about.

These 'hard wired' responses get us into trouble when we're talking about leadership and team development, where the friendly person may be a great connector but totally unsuited to the rigour of management, and the outspoken person may be an echoing empty vessel.

If you can identify the leaders in your teams, and get them learning, they can achieve great things

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Leaders aren't just the few at the top

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Great teams don't just happen. The people responsible for bringing them together and making them effective use *processes*. Because these processes look seamless, we think that they are complex and strongly tied to the capability of the individual. Kristine has spent many years reducing this complexity to its basic elements and uncovered three important perspectives:
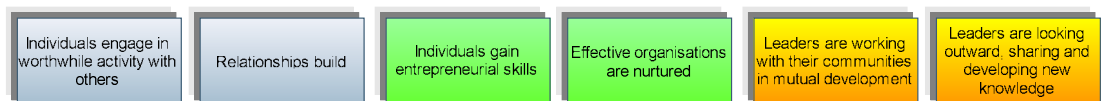
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- Everyone needs development - starting from where they're 'at' right now
- Teams (like the rest of our society) run on 'norms', if you create a norm - it will stick

We need to be taught how to learn. We think that we've been to school so we're experts in learning, but we're force fed unsolicited and unfiltered information through television and the internet and we've forgotten how to ask challenging questions and work with others to find out the answers.
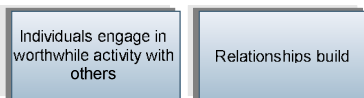
So what does this mean...

Leaders aren't just the few at the top

Everyone needs development

Sociality and leadership occurs on a continuum.

| Individuals engage in worthwhile activity with others | Relationships build | Individuals gain entrepreneurial skills | Effective organisations are nurtured | Leaders are working with their communities in mutual development | Leaders are looking outward, sharing and developing new knowledge |

People with poor connectivity simply need to 'make contact' with others in meaningful and enjoyable activity. They need to learn the basic rules of sociality and how to work together. This applies as much in sophisticated business environments as it does to new arrivals in your home town. In both situations, the best way to build relationships is to create a joint project where everyone can contribute, can learn about the others in their team, and (something we often forget) can deliver an outcome that they are proud of.

Individuals engage in worthwhile activity with others | Relationships build

Once people are able to form teams and deliver a project (and stay friends), they are ready to acquire or refine their entrepreneurial skills. We often think of entrepreneurship as a subset of business, but it's much more than that - it's the foundation of innovation. If your sales team isn't being entrepreneurial and looking for better ways to engage the customer, they'll slowly go 'off the boil'. If your volunteer group always does the same thing in the same way, it will 'set' in that framework, be difficult to change and resistant to new members.

Individuals gain entrepreneurial skills | Effective organisations are nurtured
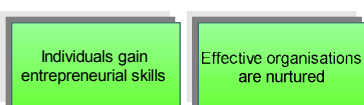
The small business model - where a handfull of people share the same goals; work together to develop the optimum approach to achieving these goals; set up processes, systems and monitoring; and 'get on with business' - is applicable to teams in large and distributed organisations. In doing so, we help people to understand how their natural and learned skills contribute to leadership - and most importantly, that 'leaders' aren't just the few at the top, that everyone in the group can provide some element of leadership to make the group stronger and more effective and to build their own skills.

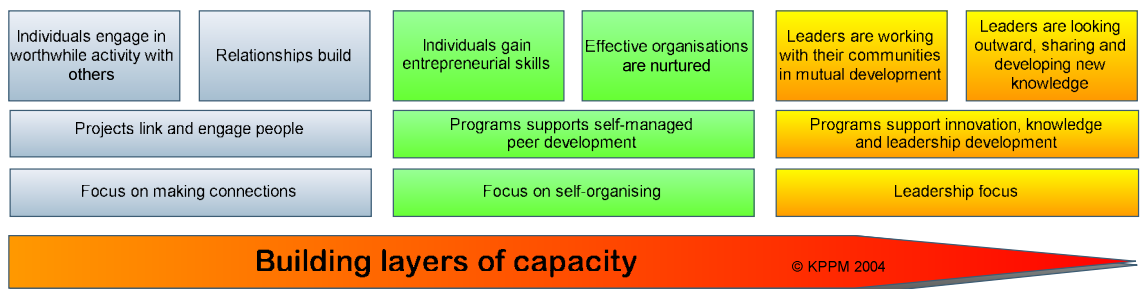# Managing Distributed Teams using Socially Embedded Leadership

Leaders are working with their communities in mutual development

Leaders are looking outward, sharing and developing new knowledge

Leaders help and develop others and look outward to find and share knowledge. Leaders bring everyone along, and help their teams, their communities to connect and grow.

But *HOW* do we make this happen? The *building layers of capacity* model sets out a simple process to move people from 'disconnected' through 'managers' to 'leaders'.

It's about working with people at their own stage of development, but doing it through action learning - using shared activities that build skills and leadership.

Individuals engage in worthwhile activity with others	Relationships build	Individuals gain entrepreneurial skills	Effective organisations are nurtured	Leaders are working with their communities in mutual development	Leaders are looking outward, sharing and developing new knowledge
Projects link and engage people		Programs supports self-managed peer development		Programs support innovation, knowledge and leadership development	
Focus on making connections		Focus on self-organising		Leadership focus	

Building layers of capacity   © KPPM 2004

So far so good, but *what* are they learning? Unless you 'seed' the content as well as teaching the process, you're missing out on some great opportunities. If you're developing skills for your company or group, you should be very clear about the learning you're expecting...

Changing the culture requires people to change their behaviour

Teams run on norms

We all know that the culture of a group drives behaviour. We also know that your stated culture (i.e. your values or vision statement) may have no connection with the real or 'hidden' culture in your organisation. Why is this? Because what is *done* is the culture, not what is said. Changing culture requires people to change their behaviour, it needs leaders to model the right behaviour, and to speak out when they see behaviours that do not contribute to the right culture.

Herein lies the rub - people are VERY difficult to change, particularly if the current situation suits them, or if they are afraid of change.
The previous section *Everyone needs development* outlined some strategies to get people to change - joint projects with good outcomes. But if your situation needs change at a deeper level, involving people's attitudes or beliefs, you'll need to be more overt.

Modelling the norms you expect is just one aspect of changing the culture, but it can be slow and require endless patience.

We forget that we are all born with the tools to create change, but we are socialised into being too 'polite' to use them. But really, it's as simple as:

1. **stating the behaviour you want**
2. **rewarding 'good' behaviour, and**
3. **sanctioning 'bad' behaviour**

That's it?

There's nothing subtle about Norm

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So where do you start?

By being clear, very very clear, about the norms in your group. Once you are all on the same page, expect everyone to model the right behaviour and give everyone permission (and appropriate language so they do not cause offence) to sanction bad behaviour.
Be overt, talk about it in the group. Discuss norms like you discuss other results - let everyone help, they are all part of norm setting, it's something that 'belongs' to the group.
You can see where Socially Embedded Leadership sits, inside the group, with everyone on the same page and heading in the same direction.

But there's still something missing...

Learn to learn

How long since you thought about how you and your team learn? Is learning on your agenda - and if it is, is it 'training' or deep learning? Are you challenging yourself and you team? Are you allowed to make mistakes and if you are, how do you share the knowledge that comes out of those mistakes?
Learning unpacks our thinking and makes us open to new ideas.
It helps with the behaviour change 'rewiring' process.
The most surprising finding from Kristine's PhD research was that groups that made learning a core norm not only coped better with change, they actively used the opportunities that come from change. They were invigorated and inspired by change - both as individuals and the team as a whole.

How do we refocus on learning? The concept of single, double and triple loop learning is a useful framework.

Single loop learning gives a straight answer to a straight question -

    Q: Who is rostered on this week?

    A: Mandy.

Double loop learning questions the assumptions behind the question -

    Q: Who is the most skilled person to have on the roster this week?

    A: Ellen (but let's roster Mandy on as well so she can develop her skills)

Triple loop learning questions the norms and values that underpin the issue -

    Q: How are we going to deliver this service this week?

    A: The roster system was based on our old way of working, what do our clients want and how do we organise our people to deliver this?

Rather than relegating learning to a box called 'training', make it front and central.

> Learning unpacks our thinking and makes us open to new ideas

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Pulling it all together

In summary, distributed teams need a central focus, they need to know what's important and how much flexibility they have to make changes at the local level.

Regular communication is important, but it won't necessarily make a difference - getting your team 'humming' needs a focus on:

1. Being clear about our goals
2. Setting and maintaining norms
3. Working on social and enterprise, starting where people are 'at'
4. Using double and triple loop questions to refocus on learning
5. Making it stimulating, challenging and fun
6. Scheduling timeout to revisit and develop

Teams that operate at arms length need embedded leaders, people who connect to outside ideas, and can facilitate and reinforce learning within the group. Socially embedded leaders don't emerge without help, but the process isn't complex either.

Can this happen overnight?

Funny you should ask...

Our daily workplace is often the worst place to learn - we are stuck in our routines, we are interrupted by urgent but not important issues, and it's hard to respond to challenge with innovation.
Learning together takes time, and if you can start with an environment where everything is new, you'll make huge leaps quickly. A two-day retreat where people have a chance to bond and explore new ideas is an ideal way to re-set your organisational norms and focus on learning together. But it doesn't end there, you need to schedule regular time away from work (even if it's just a half-day in the Board room) to revisit your norms and learning culture, it won't happen unless it gets attention.

Remember to celebrate how far you've come, and keep focused on the next stage of the *layers of capacity* model so that people don't slip back into their old comfortable ways. Make change part of your culture.

Actively working on
leadership, learning and norms...