

Leadership Development Case Series

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Leadership Mindset: Ten Key Elements, A Case of National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC)



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Abstract

Leadership mindset is the foundation of how leaders think, learn and behave in any organisation. In this Note, we enlist four progressive leadership mindsets that underpin successful leadership development in an organisation. These include: growth, learning, deliberative and promotional mindsets. Further, we illustrate application of these mindsets with ten key elements using the case of NWSC. We find that leaders maximise outcomes by applying suitable combinations of leadership mindsets to create favourable environments for performance improvement in their organisations. .

1. Introduction

According to Gottfredson and Reina (HBR, 2020), to be a great leader, you need the right mindset. Organisations have many sound business reasons to develop the leadership potential of all employees. Having a strong, responsible, and empowered staff can lead to improved performance and business results (American Management Association, 2019). Organisations have become great

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because they don't look at leadership to be a preserve of key positions, but as a practice at all levels of the organisation, regardless of employees' job functions or tenure in their positions. Strategic leadership is about a way of thinking and acting. It starts with an attitude. According to American Management

Association (2019), if an organisation is willing to empower employees to become leaders, an important first step is to develop a leadership mindset in its people. Leadership mindset is a specific attribute that is foundational to how leaders think, learn, and behave (act) in the organisation (Gottfredson and Reina, HBR, 2020). Mindsets are leader's mental lenses that dictate what information they take in and use to make sense of and navigate the situations they encounter..... simply, mindsets drive what leaders do and why they do them (ibid.).



2. Types of Leadership Mindsets

In order to apply our minds to the choice of leadership mindset or combinations of the same, we explore distinctive mindsets that have been found to affect leaders' ability to engage with others, navigate change successfully, and perform in their leadership roles more effectively. We follow proposals and ideas by Gottfredson and Reina (HBR, 2020):

(a) Growth and Fixed Mindsets: a growth mindset is a belief that people can change their talents, abilities, and intelligence. The inverse of growth mindsets are fixed mindsets for people who don't believe that people can change their talents, abilities and intelligence. Leaders with growth mindsets easily take on challenges, seek and easily accept feedback, adopt effective problem-solving strategies and engage subordinates, continuously, encouraging them to be resilient in achieving organisational goals. .

(b) Learning and Performance Mindsets: a learning mindset involves being motivated toward increasing one's competence and evolving new ideas. The inverse of this is a performance mindset that aims at securing favourable judgements (or avoiding negative judgements) about one's competence. Leaders with a learning mindset seek out for feedback, embrace learning possibilities and yearn to improve their competences, continuously. .

(c) Deliberative and Implemental Mindsets: leaders with deliberative mindset are receptive to all kinds of information, ensuring that they think and act as optimally as possible. The opposite of deliberative mindset is implemental mindset that is focussed on implementing decisions, which closes them off to new and different ideas and information. Leaders with deliberative mindsets tend to be associated with better decisions because they are more impartial, more accurate, and less biased in their processing and decision making.

(d) Promotion and Prevention Mindsets: leaders with a promotion mindset focus on winning and gains. They identify a specific purpose, goal, or destination and puts emphasis on making progress toward it. Leaders with a prevention mindset, however, are focussed on avoiding losses and preventing problems at all costs. Those with promotion mindsets are more associated with positive thinking, more open to change, more likely to persist despite challenges and setbacks, and demonstrate higher levels of task performance and innovative behaviours compared to leaders with a prevention mindset.

3. Leadership Mindset Elements from NWSC Experience

NWSC activities according to Mugisha (Note 1, July 2021, www.silvermugisha.com) are segmented into four (4) strategic focus areas (SFAs): service coverage expansion, water supply stabilisation and reliability, improving technical efficiency and maintenance/consolidation. As already pointed out above, leading employees to navigate successfully these SFAs requires a good fit and alignment of mindsets. Hereafter, we outline ten (10) mindset elements drawn from NWSC experience:



(i) Emphasis on do-it-yourself approach: when leaders have a mindset that they can moot an original idea, design it and implement it, they will drive creativity in the institution. This is contrary to wanting to 'buy' ideas and inputs from elsewhere, all the time. A do-it-yourself mindset requires determination, belief in your people who are experts in certain professional fields and providing adequate incentives (intrinsic and extrinsic) to support creativity and innovation. A do-it-yourself or self-reliance orientation requires leaders to believe that what a human being can do elsewhere can, with determination and hard work, be done in his/her own setting. Emphasising on do-it-yourself approach has given rise to many inventions in NWSC, including a plethora of IT applications, engineering designs, institutional strengthening and performance management initiatives.

(ii) Where passion resides, career also resides: if leaders inculcate a spirit of encouraging employees to grow their careers in areas of their passion and pledge all underpinning support, employees will follow suit. In most organisations, the tendency is that career growth means that you get promotions that get you out of the field to well furnished offices. Increasingly, productivity in organisations will be founded on right competences and attitude. In NWSC, for example, with less automated operations, the bulk of meaningful work is in the field. That means innovative ways and incentive systems have to be put in place to ensure employees remain hands-on. The technical fields like plumbing, static plant work, IT, marketing and finance must be scoped out in practical ways, even in terms of educational advancement (acquisition of academic qualifications) to encourage employees to keep passion in their fields. But this is possible if possibilities of promotions, salary adjustments and job title designations are matched accordingly.

(iii) The solution is born where the problem is: it is commonly said that identifying a problem is half of the solution but without providing a solution, it is a waste of time. Leaders must have a mindset that the problem and the solution stay together. You cannot divorce the two, in thought and action. It is important that to avoid delayed action and informational asymmetries, leaders encourage the problem identifiers and solution providers to work

closely, both emotionally and in physical location: not having having one in office and the other one in the field. The practical delivery tools of the solution are in the field. Other processes in the office remain part of the means and planning. A leadership mindset of hands-on and decisiveness is critical in this case.

(iv) Empower employees to be ultimate problem solvers: the best remedy for a problem is in the presumption that you are the solution. Leaders of institutions like NWSC that are massive and geographically spread, will be effective and successful if they empower employees and orchestrate a mindset that the responsibility to provide solutions lies with them. Managers and employees must be given adequate tools and confidence and advised that when it comes to solving problems confronting them, they should assume they are alone on earth. When managers act with a mindset of anticipating support from somewhere, they don't exert their full potential and productivity is the ultimate sufferer. Managers and employees must be encouraged never to postpone decision making where full information and facts are available: a wrong decision is better than no decision at all. But it is to be noted that decision making goes hand in hand with accountability and responsibility.

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(v) Humility is Key: it is important for leaders to know that it is okay to not know how to provide technical solutions to every situation – you are appraised and acknowledged for mobilising needed expertise. The mindset that if you don't know something you are a failure in your work is counterproductive and limiting. Instead, an open mind and willingness to entertain ideas and deliberations about finding a solution works best to produce needed results. Mobilising expertise

may be needed at both levels of problem identification and solution design. Enabling people to apply their knowledge power and informational superiority to solve real-life problems is an excellent leadership virtue.





(vi) Antagonistic behaviour has no net cost-benefit: it is not possible to benefit from creating disharmony in a work setting. A leadership mindset that puts emphasis on peaceful co-existence among employees, while encouraging honest feedback, yields increased productivity and emotional comfort. The amount of energy put in antagonising things at workplaces has an opportunity cost and benefits no one. There are diverse actions that catalyse antagonistic behaviours and the leader's role is to identify such actions among employees and manage their proliferation. You cannot erase them from a work setting but it needs to be clear in the organisation that the leadership discourages antagonistic tendencies.

(vii) There is no one option to solving a problem: the power of strong leadership lies in creating an environment for accurately understanding and framing an issue and enabling emergence of options to needed solutions. The best solution should then be selected using a clear and transparent criterion. In this case, the leadership mindset of optioneering is key – it is the most rational way of defining a solution to use/implement. Weak and lazy minds zero on a limited scope of possible solutions and the ultimate sufferer is value for money and legitimate intervention.

(viii) You can do everything but specialisation is key: a leader is usually in charge of many areas of expertise – in case of NWSC, you have engineering, management, financial, commercial, IT and human resources. Each organisation has a core area that forms the centre of gravity of its services. In this case, the correct leadership mindset is one that espouses openness, free space for generation of ideas, discussion and strategic focus. The leader must not allow one field to claim openly that it is more vital than the other.

The criticality of the key speciality should emerge naturally. Like at NWSC, engineering is key to the core infrastructure that is foundational to its operations. But is it not correct for anyone to claim that other fields are not important. Ordinarily, the importance of a field is reflected in objective analysis of requisite process inputs and eventual inclusion in the annual budgets. Leadership efficacy depends so much on learning options available to impart diverse knowledge to top leadership to sharpen lenses for maximising outcomes.

(ix) You must mind about staff welfare: there is a saying that you cannot get enough milk from a cow without enough feeding. Clearly, if you want maximum productivity from staff, you must adapt a leadership mindset of caring for welfare of staff, prioritising their personal development and making sure that if an organisation wins, the staff also win. At NWSC, the long history of application of emotional and financial incentives has entrenched this mindset logic. But personal development tends to be sensitive and person to holder. A caring leader needs to assess the capacity of his employees to focus on things that have long-term personal benefit and impact. At NWSC, for example, the promulgation of a provident fund is meant to take care of staff-after-retirement challenges. There are also other personal needs like shelter, transportation, marriage and upkeep that require a wide range of social coaching and mentoring efforts.

(x) A continuous learning culture ensures performance sustainability: a leadership mindset that welcomes continuous change and challenging the status quo creates a favourable environment for innovation. Leaders at all levels in the organisation must encourage colleagues to seek for and embrace new knowledge about their work processes, inputs and goals. The tools for generating new knowledge include: reading materials, seminal series, smart benchmarking possibilities and communities of practice for coaching and mentoring.

4. Conclusion

Leadership mindset is the foundation of leadership efficacy in any organisation. In this Note, we have enlisted four progressive leadership mindsets that underpin successful leadership development in an organisation. These include: growth, learning, deliberative and promotional mindsets. Further, we have illustrated application of these mindsets with ten key elements using the case of NWSC.

