

# Being a leader within an organisation has never been more challenging Time for a new approach

By Kate Lowry

The role of a leader inside an organisation faces a rising tide of challenge greater than ever before. The need to achieve more with ever less resource has become a 'New Normal'. Organisations are more complex, with global interfaces and technology creating an 'always on' 24/7 environment and culture. To meet the ambiguities and dilemmas created by this reality a new approach, looking at how leaders actually operate and how they truly lead effectively is needed. Time to catch the next wave.

## What is performance?

Performance as a leader can be likened to a surfer 'catching the right wave at the right time, with the right approach'. The feeling when you reach your goal, maybe even outperforming it, is exhilarating! You needed knowledge and skill to be able to do it, sure, but in the moment you also used timing, style, and balance so that everything came together. That synergy between you, your people, your environment, the challenge you faced and the approach you selected to create the best available outcome, lies at the core of being a successful modern leader.



On our Developing Leadership Practice programme we use the Lowry Performance Wave as a method to help explain how leaders can consistently grow the performance of themselves and that of their people, even in the most challenging of contexts.

On the programme participants learn about their own performance and that of their teams by experientially 'surfing' the wave.

### How does it work?

The Lowry Performance Wave is based upon Gestalt Psychology. This approach can make an invaluable contribution in understanding how to perform in today's organisational environments.

### Why is Gestalt theory so relevant right now?

Gestalt theory helps guide the individual's thinking reminding the leaders to see every situation as being part of a 'whole field' of experience. We can never separate ourselves from the context in which we are in, and are in constant interaction with it. The surfer cannot perform separately from the ocean. The leader needs to be aware of the wider picture. So when conditions are turbulent leaders have to find a way to catch a wave and if there is no surf, they need the productive habit of looking at different options.

## The leader needs to see the opportunities others miss.

When constant change is accepted as the 'New Normal', the leader also needs to accept that they are both in their organisational system and a part of it. The world and organisations are relational and what leaders do and how they do it will have an effect on everyone else. The surfer is usually part of a group, and has to be aware enough to take account of other surfers, their actions and intent. The leader appreciates their context better than others.

The weather is unpredictable. The surfer needs to be able to respond quickly and adapt their style to suit emergent conditions. The leader accepts that conditions outside the organisation may alter, and moves with this change faster than others.

We know that how leaders perceive the world, and what they choose to focus on, matters much more than it used to. Time is short and expectation high. Self-awareness is the key to decision making.

Increased conscious awareness facilitates choice by enabling the leader to decide between competing options, to know when to move with their energy and when to conserve it. The surfer knows when to paddle out for a while and wait for the next wave. The leader understands why they have to lead.

### Surfing your own performance wave

The Lowry Performance Wave explains how we go about using our energy to achieve performance. Also how we can interrupt our flow and lose focus – missing the wave. It can also be used to understand the performance of others, and help the leader know when to intervene, and what action might prove most effective. For leaders a meaningful 'gestalt' is how they make sense out of all that is going on moment by moment in a busy day.

When things are going well, they behave spontaneously and creatively to the on-going demands, attending to the most compelling and urgent aspect. Taking action on the most urgent priority is part of the job.

Athletes describe this place well. Matthew Pinsent said when reflecting on his 2004 Olympic Gold in rowing. "There was a very calm, quiet place in my head that knew exactly where we were, knew exactly how far there was to go and knew exactly what we had to do."

Attending to what happens inwardly, noticing and attending to emotions arising from a decision taps into a new resource. This is 'mindfulness': being fully engaged in a situation and at the same time feeling present and centred.

From this place of mindfulness come new ways of approaching things, for example learning to use presence to influence key stakeholders and experimenting with the different conversations which need to be had and engage in a mature, honest and challenging dialogue.

## This is a new and important practice for today's leaders and we will focus on it.

Being able to tune into what is happening means tapping into the creative possibilities of the moment with confidence and intentionality. The leader can then step back from repeating the same patterns of behaviour in response to a situation, and sense more of a call in response to the business. This is vital for organisations to maintain their advantage.





Because the organisational world is so hectic, and it can seem that everything is a priority, we need to ensure that we create the space to learn and gain satisfaction from our on-going experience. Regular pauses with time to reflect are essential.

The organisational world offers many opportunities, and we need to be well rested and energetic enough to take them. Building in time to manage pressure, develop resilience and recuperate are all of key importance.

## We look at the challenges faced by the leader in a different way.

### Shaping my own leadership practice

To become a high performing surfer it takes many years of constant revision and enhancement: this is because like leadership it isn't just a skill, it's a practice. You learn firstly the skills of surfing, on the beach. You get on and off the board numerous times, and learn the technique of how to move from lying flat on the board to standing up. All before you get into the water! You have all the right equipment, great board, top of the range wetsuit, and as soon as you get into the sea everything changes. You are now in touch with the movement and energy of something very vast, powerful and unpredictable.

Similarly you will have mastered the skills of knowing your industry, setting objectives, managing performance and achieving results. You have the right grounding but now you need to prepare yourself for more challenging times. More senior roles await you that will demand that you are more than just skilled.

As well as skill you will need to develop your own leadership practice. Then you can be confident you will be able to perform in a constantly pressurised environment.

This demands the ability to:

- Stay present and centred whilst engaged in a situation.
- Give focus to immediate task priorities and still be aware of emergent business needs.
- Access creativity to solve problems.
- Engage in mature, honest and challenging dialogue.
- Create time and space to learn and develop resilience.
- Revitalise and inspire.

The Developing Leadership Practice programme will move between the 'beach and the sea', moving smoothly from skill to practice, theory to reality, raising your awareness of yourself, your people and your organisation. The leadership practice that lies at the heart of finding new ways to consistently surf your own performance wave.

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