



# Actionable Leadership in the Creative Age

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## Executive Summary

Skillssoft conducted a survey to compare the traits that defined 20th century leaders with the characteristics of their 21st century counterparts. Not surprisingly, the 21st century leader must be more flexible, collaborative and creative than his or her predecessors. While many organizations understand how leadership is changing, their cultures have not yet adapted to encourage these new leadership traits. This paper provides some techniques for developing a culture that fosters innovation and encourages 21st century leadership methods and mindsets.



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## New ways to look at tomorrow's leadership

The world is changing, and those changes are accelerating rapidly. We know this. Competition is emerging more rapidly than ever before throughout all markets and from companies of all sizes— from startups to legacy multinationals— and from every corner of the globe, for every market segment. It has become increasingly clear that the organizations that will not only withstand these market pressures but flourish—grow and rise like phoenixes out of the ashes of this hypercompetitive landscape— are those that can figure out how to leverage the innovative power of every individual in the company.

At the heart of this is for leaders to not only be creative in their own thinking but to foster a culture of innovation.

Those companies that draw out the qualities of initiative, creativity and passion that translate into execution of new services and products will be the ones that thrive in the Creative Age. And because we can no longer purely rely on our existing technologies, distribution capabilities or products and services, we know that now, more than ever before, we need to harness the potential individual and collaborative capacities that reside in each of our organizations. By doing this, we will bring new products and services of irresistible value to the world. More than 1,100 individuals from organizations around the world participated in Skillsoft's 21st Century Leadership Survey. The purpose of this study was to understand what workers today believe were the most effective organizational leadership attributes and capabilities that created success in the past, versus those that will create sustainable success and innovation in the future. Additional questions in the survey uncovered some of the leadership and organizational management practices as well as some of the work habits frequently practiced in today's organizations. The survey results reveal that respondents understand the attributes and behavioral trends that will drive success and innovation into the future, yet acknowledge that their organizations are celebrating and encouraging many behaviors and practices that created success in the last century. It shows that people understand and want to develop emerging competitive behaviors, yet often see their organizations as being behind the curve in building the habitats that encourage and create 21st century leadership methods and mindsets. The upshot is that today's workers are looking for leaders who have a broad vision, both geographically and temporally, who have integrity and who want to work with others to form a new vision of the future for their organizations. So how can leaders move their organizations into this new millennium?

At the heart of this is for leaders to not only be creative in their own thinking but to foster a culture of innovation through supporting those who diverge from the norm in their thinking, build relationships, tolerate risk, persist in their ideas, take action and strive for deeper meaning in everything they do. Below are a few ideas to help leaders at all levels make measurable change in their organizations that, in this turbulent economy, can ultimately lead to more creativity and competitive advantage.

## Act despite anxiety and chaos

In the always-on, bottle-rocket economy in which creative contributors spend their extended waking hours in simultaneous and schizophrenic bouts of digital grazing, conference calls, work tasks and social media, it's no surprise anxieties and hypertension have overtaken the workforce. It's common to feel overwhelmed with looming deadlines and dueling projects. Understand that you have more control than you think. You might expect that, as the markets were crashing in 1929 and again in 2008, sleep-deprived, anxious bankers worked tirelessly to arrest the free-fall. And yet, more often, they sat in paralyzed hypnosis as the crisis unfolded before them— not because they were unable to do anything about it but because they were drawn into a state of learned helplessness, that point at which we feel we are utterly unable to make a difference no matter what we do. To control our anxiety and succeed in whatever issue is at hand, we have to start by focusing on what we can control, which may not be much, but handling that may lead to being able to handle bigger issues.

I recently interviewed Chip Conley, founder and CEO of Joiede Vivre (and killer TED speaker), who offered a great exercise about turning negative stress into positive challenge that he is debuting in his book, *Emotional Equations*:

- Think of a project, task or effort in which you are involved.
- Write down all of the things over which you have control.
- Now write down the things over which you think you have little or no control.

Chip found, in trying this exercise out on hundreds and hundreds of leaders, that they come to realize the number of elements over which they do have control is surprisingly higher than they thought. And by clearly identifying and sharing pieces over which they think they have no control, they quickly realize that the human resources and available insights needed to resolve the bigger issues can be accessed more readily than they previously thought.

## Understand where you spend your time

Martin Seligman suggests learning to set priorities in what you want to accomplish by weighing your goals against how you actually spend your time: Put up a whiteboard in your office, kitchen or other places you frequent and write on it three to five things you really want to accomplish. Then list your activities and write down the actual time you spend on each. The difference between time invested and your stated goals might surprise you.

## Take action

Now act. Get in motion. I heard this adage recently: “The amount of time it takes you to accomplish anything is equal to the amount of time you have to do it.” In other words, if you have two weeks to do the presentation, it will take two weeks. If you have two hours, it will take two hours. So, to

take control, place deadlines on yourself and act. In my experience, the big project I've been putting off usually takes a lot less time that I thought it would. As my new friend Alexander Kjerulf likes to say, "We are always choosing, since inaction is also a choice." So choose to act. Recognize the #1 motivational factor in the world. Nailing down the primary motivational factor in the world is not easy, but Teresa Amabile and her colleague Steven Kramer did research to do just that<sup>1</sup>. They analyzed 12,000 diary entries from 238 employees in seven companies to find that out, which Amabile documented in her book *The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement and Creativity at Work*. What the researchers discovered is that, while managers in their studies ranked recognition as the number-one employee motivator, employees most value meaningful progress in their work. Only five percent of managers believed this was a primary motivator. Leaders may think they can dictate obedience, hope for loyalty and even buy expertise, but these qualities no longer constitute real competitive advantage. Instead, we need to foster an environment in which people feel connected, engaged and can move forward together to create next-generation, innovative value.

## Recognize the velocity of learning

We tend not to think of learning as having a velocity, but it does. The classic notion of practicing involves putting in the hours, doing the time, right? But there is a striking difference in the quality of practice that leads to accelerated learning. It isn't about watching the clock but more about purposeful practicing, which is found right on the edges of your ability, at the intersection of challenge and ability. This is where you are successful perhaps 50-75 percent of the time—low enough to avoid overconfidence and loss of challenge but high enough to avoid stress and anxiety. The only way to find that sweet spot is to try, to get in action. Acquiring new skills or behaviors, in particular, is not so much about stopping what we've been doing but rather focusing on doing something in a different way, developing new behaviors. Dan Coyle, in his book *The Talent Code*, told a marvelous story about visiting the Shyness Clinic in Palo Alto, CA<sup>2</sup>. The folks that come to the clinic often have arrived at a point where their social anxieties and shyness have become a real hindrance and barrier to connecting with other people, which ultimately interferes with other activities. The clinic focuses on developing "social fitness"—much like developing physical fitness, or leadership or creative capacities—through practicing incrementally difficult behavioral tasks. For example, one exercise is to have participants approach two people each day in a



Six Top Leadership Characteristics for the 21st Century:

1. Global perspective
2. Forward-looking
3. Relationship-builder
4. High integrity
5. Collaborative
6. Open-minded

Source: Skillssoft's 21st Century Leadership Survey

<sup>1</sup> *Time Pressure and Creativity: Why Time Is Not on Your Side* by Teresa Amabile. Harvard Business School, July 29, 2002

<sup>2</sup> *The Talent Code* by Daniel Coyle. Bantam Books, 2009.

public place and simply ask them the time of day. Then, for example, participants would graduate to asking a store manager where the restroom is. For a final exam, participants are tasked to go to a supermarket and intentionally drop a whole watermelon on the floor. They then needed to apologize for the accident and work with the market employees to deal with the mess. If participants had been asked to drop a watermelon as their first task, they would have been appalled and probably would not have been able to complete the task. However, through purposeful practice—putting themselves forward in small, incrementally challenging ways over time—they could build the social and emotional capacities to effectively deal with potentially daunting social situations. For practice to be effective, it needs to be in context, under real conditions, and with a little stress, a little challenge, so that we are on the edges of our ability. For example, if you're coaching soccer, instead of asking a player to make twenty penalty kicks at the end of a practice scrimmage, stop the scrimmage and have that player make just two, under the pressure of actual play.

## Praise effort and grit, not talent

*“Talent is cheaper than table salt. What separates the talented individual from the successful one is a lot of hard work.” —Stephen King.*

Author Carol Dweck, the Lewis and Virginia Eaton Professor of Psychology at Stanford University, led a fascinating study in 1998 in which she and her colleagues gave 400 fifth graders a series of tests, mostly puzzles. The researchers then praised the students in two different ways, using only six words. With half of the group they said, “You must be smart at this,” and with the other half they said, “You must have tried really hard.”

If people believe they have special talent and are expected to perform well, the thought of failing expectations becomes a liability.

The first word set awarded intelligence and innate talent, similar to how many of us parents and coaches (me included) get trapped into talking about, and to, our kids. We say how smart they are, or how naturally gifted they are. The second word set praised effort, determination, preparation, grit. What the researchers were interested in was how the kids, depending on the type of praise they received, would view their abilities—as fixed and unchanging, or as malleable and able to grow and change with work. In the next round of puzzles, the kids were offered a choice: they could try harder problems or easier ones. Perhaps surprisingly, the kids praised for talent selected the easier problems while the kids praised for effort chose to attempt the harder ones. Why? While we might think that receiving praise for innate abilities would inspire confidence, Dweck found out that instead we create a form of status—a height from which to fall. If people believe they have special talent and are expected to perform well, the thought of failing expectations becomes a liability. To protect themselves as “gifted and talented” individuals, they will choose easier tasks to ensure they have high performance. In the next part of the study, both sets of kids were given harder problems to solve and both sets of kids performed more poorly. Not surprising, but here's the interesting

thing: When the researchers asked the kids how they did on the problems, the kids praised for talent lied 40 percent of the time, presumably to maintain their social status as “talented.” However, when the kids praised for effort were asked the same question, only 10 percent of them exaggerated their performance, presumably because their ego was not wrapped up in their performance. Here’s where it gets really interesting. In the next phase of the study, both sets of kids were given problems comparable to the original set of problems. In terms of difficulty, this next set was just as challenging as the first. The group praised for talent had just had an ego setback in the earlier round and did 20 percent worse than they did the first time around. They were told they were smart, then they performed poorly, and now when they attacked the same level of difficulty with decreased confidence, they did 20 percent worse. The second group, on the other hand, did 30 percent better this time around. For those kids, success was about effort, and failure just meant they needed to work harder instead of worrying about loss of status. While the difference between these two groups of kids was just six words, keep in mind there are a lot of ways to say, “You must have tried really hard.” Dweck and her colleagues use this kind of effort or “process praise” for encouraging engagement, perseverance, improvement and other processes.

Here are some examples of how to convey recognition of grit and perseverance in those around you, modeled on Dweck’s suggestions:

- “You really prepared for that meeting, and your presentation showed it. You researched the customer’s company and interests, outlined the problem perfectly and presented solutions very well. That really worked!”
- “I like the way you tried all kinds of strategies on that reporting problem until you finally got it.”
- “It was a long, hard research assignment, but you stuck to it and got it done. You stayed at the task, kept up your concentration and kept working. That’s great!”
- “I like that you took on that challenging project for the new business group. It will take a lot of work—doing the research, designing the integration, acquiring the resources and building it. You’re going to learn a lot of great things.”

Next time you see excellence, praise the effort it must have taken to get there. You’ll not only be rewarding excellence but also building growth and confidence.

## Connect with purpose for performance

There’s a small trick—a small shift in thinking, in mindset— that can translate to immense performance gains. It’s this: connect personally with the impact of what you do. Let me give you an example. Adam Grant, a talented young professor at the Wharton School, conducted a study a few years ago in which he worked with a group of students at the University of Michigan<sup>3</sup>. These students were earning a little extra cash by making cold calls to alumni to raise money that would go to a scholarship fund for students who were accepted at the university but couldn’t afford the tuition. Grant and his

<sup>3</sup> “Impact and the Art of Motivation Maintenance: The Effects of Contact with Beneficiaries on Persistence Behavior” by Adam Grant, et al. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 103, issue 2, 2007

colleagues divided the students into three separate groups and had them perform activities for just 10 minutes before their shifts. With one group, the students could do whatever they wanted for 10 minutes before their calls—check out Facebook, text their friends, whatever. The second group was asked to read letters for a few minutes from people who had benefitted from the scholarship fund on which they were working and then talk about the contents of the letter with their peers for a couple minutes. The third group was also given a handful of letters to read together, but, after a few minutes in the break room, they got a surprise. The call organizer would say, “We have a special guest on the phone,” who was a real recipient of the scholarship fund on which the students were working. For just five minutes, the students talked with the beneficiary. They could ask questions such as where the beneficiaries were from, what classes they were taking and what they intended to do after they graduated. Just for five minutes. At the conclusion of the phone call, the organizer would say, “Remember this when you’re on the phone—this is someone you’re supporting.” That’s it—a five-minute intervention to connect the callers with the impact, the difference, the real goal of their work. The result? A 250-percent increase in revenue performance sustained over a month after that single intervention—250 percent better than their peers that had no direct contact with the beneficiaries. Take an opportunity to find and talk to the people who actually consume, touch, experience or contact what you offer or what you create. It will remind you of why you do what you do. It will lead to higher quality, integrity and excellence in craftsmanship and to a better relationship with your customer. It will also lead to higher performance. How does 250 percent sound?

## Toward a greater goal

When we act despite uncertainty, and encourage others to take action amidst uncertainty as well, we strengthen and grow not only our own skills but also reinforce confidence of action in others. When we inspire those around us to take initiative, to sustain that action and momentum we must always remember the most powerful motivating factor is a sense of progress in meaningful work. By celebrating and reinforcing a clear sense of measurable progress, we ensure not only progress itself, but heightened sense of meaningful productivity of those around us. And finally, to build measurable growth of talent there must be elements of intentional challenge and adversity. Unless we are reaching and stretching ourselves in both our behaviors and beliefs, we are short of our own potential. To encourage ourselves and those around us to step further, we should focus our inquiry and action on the real impact we intend to make. As shown in Adam Grant’s work, when we connect emotionally and empathetically with the envisioned future impact our service, or product, or action can make, we connect with the “Why?” of what we do.



## Further Reading

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