

Get the most out of people - take Response-ability

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We're all familiar with the idea of taking responsibility – being the one who organises things, takes charge and is accountable for what happens. But do you find that, despite all your efforts, you aren't getting the most out of your people – employees, colleagues, suppliers, contacts? Then it's time to shift your focus from responsibility to Response-ability.

Be the host to lead the most

How do you think of yourself as a leader? A good old-fashioned hero, prepared to lead from the front? Or perhaps as a servant, helping those you work with to achieve their goals? Good news – there's a new way of thinking about leadership that uniquely combines these perspectives AND helps you tap into a vast bank of your existing experience. Welcome to the world of leader as host.

A host, as you will know, is someone who entertains and receives guests. When you invite friends round for dinner, have a dance party or even organise the village fete, you're acting as a host. We've all done something like this. But let's look at it from the perspective of leadership – and in particular how you can connect better with those around you, your market, customers and staff.

Being a good host requires you to keep up a balance of activities. Yes, you have to step forwards and take responsibility – prepare things, get supplies, invite people and get things ready. But then, when people start arriving you switch into responsive mode – introducing people, making connections, responding to what happens. It's not one or the other, not hero or servant – it's both. It's Response-ability.

Stepping forward – defining expectations

At the outset, it's your role as a leader to gather people together and set expectations. You may want to help everyone get clear about:

- What are your goals
- What are you intending that each person is bringing to the table – skills, knowledge, etc
- What's important to you about HOW things will proceed – expectations and boundaries

That's set the frame – so is it time to get going. Not yet! You want to get the most out of people, so now is the time for

Stepping back – creating space for interaction

Once everyone's clear about YOUR ideas, you are keen to give them a chance. This doesn't mean being inactive – on the contrary, you'll want to be alert and responsive. You can:

- Ask some questions to draw out people's expertise
- Encourage discussion
- Step back and watch

There might be a slow start... but hang in there. Give people a chance. You gathered these people, and if you want to get the most out of them, you owe them a chance to get involved. It feels like a hard thing, to open up a space for others to interact, a bit like losing control. But you're not losing control. On the contrary, you are still there, listening and engaged. And when the time comes, you can step forward again and nudge things back on track.

Don't be a dictator – or an abdicator

I sometimes come across '**dictators**' – people who spend all their time laying down the law about what's to be done and how. You may have seen one or two yourself. They appear to have no time for anyone else's ideas or input. The ironic thing is that they are usually very committed to the success of their business – so much so that they are totally focused on doing things their way.

Dictators can get success in the short run, but struggle to engage other people in a sustainable way. They tend to attract followers who like being told what to do – which is great for the short run but not a creative proposition for growing the enterprise. I once met a manager who told his team what to do and even thought they knew it wouldn't work they went ahead and did as they were told. His comment was: my people undermine me by doing exactly what I tell them to do.'

On the other hand, I find the occasional '**abdicator**' manager too – someone who spends too much time stepping back and disengaging. This is often because people think they have delegated something – and then don't check in, ask how things are going, keep an eye out from a distance.

I remember inheriting the preparation of a monthly report for my manager. I did it for 18 months, then found the reports in a pile in his office. 'What do you do with these?', I asked. 'Nothing...', he replied – 'I was wondering why you were sending them!'. So, perhaps we were both at fault, but it would have been nice to have a manager with more engagement.

Response-ability – stepping forwards and backwards

Leadership is like a dance between these two things – stepping forward with your own position, then stepping back to allow engagement and creative interaction. When to do it? As a general rule, do one, then the other. If you're wanting more involvement, step back a bit more often, and wait to see what happens. If things are getting too far off track, check that people are clear about what is expected/that you have a common understanding of what's wanted? You will develop a sense of how this works in your own organisation.

Remember the metaphor of 'leader as host':

- Invite people in and be clear about what you're inviting them to
- Set them up and introduce them to each other
- Let them get on with it
- ...And keep watching what's happening so you can step in when needed.



Mark McKergow hosts www.hostleadership.com, where you can now download free resources and engage with others around the powerful metaphor of leader as host. He is co-author of the best-selling '[The Solutions Focus](#)'. Connect @thehostleader.