

# Developing**Leaders**

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Karen Cates

## EXECUTIVE PRESENCE

Rob Salafia

## MINDSETS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Robert Hooijberg

## LEAD AS A HOST NOT A HERO

Mark McKergow

## FINDING PURPOSE ON KILIMANJARO

Michigan Ross on expedition

# CREATING HUMAN-FRIENDLY ORGANIZATIONS

Insights from Henley, Hult Ashridge, IMD, Kellogg,  
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# Lead as a Host not a Hero

## Leadership that Builds Engagement and Performance

BY MARK MCKERGOW

The idea of the leader as enabler and supporter rather than as decisive hero is not a new one. Books have been written, conferences held, countless blogs uploaded... and yet this shift in emphasis is apparently gaining ground only slowly.

The recent state of UK politics, when Prime Minister Theresa May, noted for sphynx-like levels of reserve when dealing with colleagues and then making decisions by herself, is a case in point.

Indeed, it seems that we are in the midst of a resurgence of 'strong man' leadership. It is an easy choice – after all, if someone else is prepared to take the hard decisions, all the followers need to do is cheer them on! But... this leads to disengagement, to people off-loading their responsibilities and interests onto someone else. That someone else is then in a position to misrepresent and misuse their power.

An alternative stance is for the leader to act 'post-heroically' – someone who can draw people together, involve and

**'Post-heroically' – someone who can draw people together, involve and engage, and build participation**

engage, and build participation. This movement perhaps started with the ground-breaking work of Robert Greenleaf several decades ago, with his work on servant-leadership. In this model, the leader serves their organization and community, stewarding it for the future. It is a brilliant counterblast to heroic leadership cultures. However, it has made disappointing progress in terms of adoption, particularly outside church settings.

### **The power of a metaphor**

The difficulty of helping leaders to move towards working in a more participative and engaging way is not so much in the potential advantages (which are well known by now) but more in the practicalities of how to do it. What do we actually do when we want to build alliances? What actions can we take when we are let down by a colleague? This is where the idea of host leadership becomes very useful indeed – it is a metaphor as well as a model.

Metaphors connect things we already know about with things we don't. In this case, the metaphor is that hosting a party has many similarities with leading a team or an organization. (I will unpack the details of this below – there are many parallels.) Think about your own experience of hosting parties or gatherings. These may be very formal and planned events such as weddings, or much more informal bring-a-bottle-and-dance rave-ups, or even that most challenging event of all, a child's birthday party with 20 young friends.

Have you hosted parties? Yes. Have you been a guest at parties? Yes. So you know at some level how this works from both sides. Do you

know a well-hosted event when you attend one? I bet you do. How exactly do you go about hosting a party? Well, that is another question. When I speak to leaders around the world they can come up with some answers pretty quickly – which can then be expanded with teaching and reflection.

### Hosting – a new and yet ancient art

In developing the ideas of host leadership, I was surprised to find that there was no book which really went into the detail of how to host your guests. Because that is the shift we are talking about here – a shift from seeing the leader as a strong individual towards seeing leading as an activity based around relationships. That is the first step – think of yourself as a host, and the others involved as your guests. (You do not actually have to BE a host in order to think like one, of course!)

In the research for our book *Host: Six New Rules Roles of Engagement*, Helen Bailey and I interviewed great hosts who seemed to us to act like leaders, and great leaders who seemed to act like hosts. We saw people in business, healthcare, education, public service and the voluntary sector working in this way. We saw examples of host leadership in many cultures, from the world's biggest networking organization based in the USA to small industrial companies in England to indigenous peoples in Australia.

### Stepping forwards and stepping back

One of the most important aspects of leading as a host is the art of stepping forwards – and then stepping back. People expect leaders to step forward – after all, that is how they get attention, get their message across, begin to engage with people. But have you ever been to a party where the host will not shut up, where it is all about *them*? It gets tiresome after a short while. Good hosts know that it is important that they get things moving by stepping forward – and then step back, to allow space for others to engage, for people to connect, for multiple conversations to develop.

When good leaders step back, they are not simply vanishing from the scene. They are alert, aware, looking around, talking to different groups, seeing how things are going. That is how they know when to step forward again, and in which role.

## **Roles, not rules, for leading**

Some people like rules. After all, rules make life simple – do this, and you will thrive. Do that, and you are doomed. Simple, tempting... and wrong. It is more complicated than that. When we looked around to see what great hosts and leaders did, we found that they don't act in terms of rules, they act in terms of **roles**. Only one letter different, but a very different proposition.

A role is something you take on ***when it is needed***. We all have many roles in life – maybe parent, bread-winner, football coach, spouse and so on. We do all of these – but not equally all the time. In the same way, our six roles for a host leader are things that we bring out when they are needed, when they are the next thing that matters. And of course, it is useful to know, practise and build your skills in each role.

To really get the most out of this article, you might like to think about something you are grappling with right now in your organization. Maybe something you would like to get going, a long-standing issue that seems stuck, or a challenging situation. Hold that in your mind as we look at the different roles, and see which of them seems to offer you some interesting possibilities.

## **Initiator role – getting things moving**

A key role of leaders is helping to build priorities and focus. Just as someone needs to decide to host a gathering, someone has to have some initial thoughts about where the next developments could be for the organization. However, even before that, there is a necessary preliminary stage – listening for what is being called for. This can take some reflection and gathering of ideas and perspectives – it is more

about appreciating the scenery for a moment than acting like a bull in a china shop!

Once some initial priorities form, there are two key aspects to consider. The first is to form long-term hopes, aspirations and goals. 'Long-term' is a relative concept, of course. It might be thirty years in electricity generation, or thirty days if you are setting up a sandwich bar. That is your judgement – how do you want things to be?

The second thing is *not* to form a plan about how to get there! There are usually just too many unknowns and uncertainties. Much more useful is to decide on some next steps – things you can do right now to get things moving. That way, the feedback and learning you get will come from actual experience. And one kind of next step is about involving more people.

- What is being called for in your team/organization?
- What are your long term hopes and aspirations?
- What are the next small steps?



## Great hosts and leaders don't act in terms of rules, they act in terms of roles.... a very different proposition

### Inviter role – involving others

The concept of invitational thinking is at the heart of host leadership. When we invite, and people accept, they show up wanting to get involved and be part of the process. Being an **Inviter** is about reaching out and engaging with those around us in a way which invites – rather than insists – that they join us. It is about seeing the participation of others as a valuable gift, rather than the result of a contract of employment.

Actively inviting people to be involved in your project has many benefits. You get to choose (usually) who to invite. You can seek the right balances of experience, know-how and attitude. There is choice on both sides – you choose who to invite, and they can choose to join you. And in making that choice, they are already making you a commitment.

- Who would you like to involve next?
- How can you extend an attractive and personal invitation to them?

### Space Creator role – building the context for interaction

Creating a suitable space for the events to unfold is an essential part of the process – the host plays a vital role upfront in deciding on the space and how it is to be organized, laid out and used. The **Space Creator** role involves both creating an excellent space to support the activity and also refreshing and renewing the space to keep it functioning well. This is another example of the flexibility of the host role – one minute making big decisions about what is next and the next clearing up a spilled drink.

This aspect of focus on space is not often found in conventional leadership books. However, choosing a good space can make all the difference in the outcome. There is a time for grandeur, and there is a time for informality, and they support very different processes and messages.

- What space will support the interactions you seek?
- How can you prepare it to welcome people?
- How can you keep it refreshed and relevant?

### **Gatekeeper role – negotiating the boundaries**

Acting as a **Gatekeeper**, Host Leaders know the importance, and possibilities, of defining boundaries. A boundary can serve the Host Leader well by making clear what expectations and norms apply, helping people understand where they are and what they are committing to do in a certain place or role.

One of the key roles of a Host Leader is to welcome newcomers – this also gives an excellent chance to share something of the routines and rituals of the organisation. The boundaries can include the scope of the work, who is involved (and who is not), and how we do things here. A host can even, in the last resort, throw people out if that's really necessary!

- How can you welcome people?
- How do you let them know how things work here and what's expected?
- How do you extend and change your boundaries over time?

### **Connector role – link people and expertise together**

Host Leaders build connections between people, link their ideas and know when to leave them to it, creating the possibility of something emerging. If we have initiated something, invited people and created a space, we clearly want to create something that would not happen

without people getting together. As a **Connector**, we understand that, having brought people together, at some point we need to get out of the way, let the magic work and allow possibilities to emerge.

**Leading as a host is a great way to think and act when things are fast-moving and uncertain**

- How can you help yourself by connecting others rather than being the centre of everything?
- How can you meet more people, to widen your network and expand your possibilities?

### **Co-Participator role – leading AND joining in**

When we are invited for dinner, we expect the host to be a **Co-Participator**, not only serving us with food, but eating the same food with us. Not only that; hosting etiquette demands that the host serve their guests first. In hosting terms, this is a clear expectation. In leadership terms, it is not so clear. As host leaders, we want to be seen as part of the team as well as leading it. Sometimes you need to go first, to show the way. Other times you need to go last, to allow others to take centre stage.

- When can you serve others first?
- When is it important for you to take a 'turn at the coal-face' along with your team?

### **Conclusion**

The roles are not a process, even though they make sense in the order given here. Rather, they give different ways for us as leaders to step forward when we need to, and to observe progress so that we support rather than always dominate. Some of the roles may require more effort for you than others. You may well need to iterate and keep adjusting – after all, change is happening all the time, and leading as a host is a great way to think and act when things are fast-moving and uncertain.



Leading as a host is an art rich with possibilities. In this short article, I have attempted to outline some of the key aspects and practicalities. There is so much more experience and inspiration to come.

## References

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Mark McKergow PhD MBA is a consultant, speaker and author bringing new ideas into the world of organizations for almost thirty years. He is the co-author *'The Solutions Focus: Making Coaching & Change SIMPLE'* (Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2007)

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