



Leadership models/interpretation of organisational expectations

Employee understanding, around what leadership is and expectations around the way it is carried out are typically defined by:

- Organisational culture
- Competency frameworks
- Observations of colleagues and managers. These observations provide the reference point to base their behaviour on

Typically organisational culture is influenced by senior people in the business and the large employee groups. Employees look for cues in their working environments to help them understand how to behave in order to 'get on' at work and fulfil others' expectations of them. This is reinforced by the 'similar to me' effect. The similar to me effect is where managers are significantly more likely to give opportunities, such as stretching projects, additional responsibilities, and favourable positions to staff members they consider, even subconsciously, to be similar to themselves. This similarity can be based on a variety of things, including appearance, cultural background and educational background. This occurs because as humans we are much more likely to trust other people who we see as being similar to ourselves to do a good job – simply because we think they are more likely to complete the work the way that we would. In our minds, this means they become a 'safe bet' for doing a good job.

Organisational systems and processes

The formal skills, knowledge and behaviour required to be successful within organisations are usually recorded in the form of organisational competencies and competency frameworks. These frameworks provide organisations with the ability to define the behaviours expected from their employees and therefore, support managers in differentiating poor and excellent performance.

It is all too common however, for these competencies and behavioural indicators to include language that simply reflects the working style of the senior, often male, team. This can be through very subtle ways such as the language the competencies are written in. This can include vague words such as 'drive' and 'gravitas' or imprecise words such as 'assertive'.

It is also important to consider who is involved in the development of competencies. Have you sought the views of people who currently hold the positions in question in combination with a wider (and possibly more gender balanced group)? Have job roles therefore been considered in the broadest of terms or do they simply describe the current job incumbents?

Having developed gender-neutral competencies, it is also important to consider the consistency with which the competencies are subsequently used. Managers need to have time to become familiar not only with the competencies, but also how to recognise positive demonstrations of the behaviours covered by the competencies in real working environments. Benchmarking exercises between managers are also important here as is the consistent use of competencies.

It is common for organisations to ensure that fair assessment procedures, such as an assessment centre, are used, but then allow assessors to introduce subjective views into the wash-up discussion, such as how an individual may 'fit' with the team. It is important to remember that if team-working/communication is important to the role, it must be measured as part of the assessment process.

Misperceptions of needs and career aspirations

In some circumstances managers do not offer their team members, and in particular female team members, development opportunities because they perceive:

- A lack of interest in progression
- A lack of suitability

Frequently, these assumptions are made without any consultation with the individual employees, or based on conversations that occurred 12 months or more ago. The ease with which busy managers make these decisions underlines the need to ensure that they are operating fair and regular appraisal processes.

Flexible working

Flexible working has typically been seen as 'a woman's issue', however given the changing nature of family units, fiscal balance of the UK, and employer expectations, flexible working options are being requested increasingly by men as well as women.

Some of the most common findings from diversity audits relate to flexible working. Men frequently report feeling unable to request flexible working, even when they are legally entitled to do so. Flexible working is also often seen as a career killer.

For these reasons, it is important to consider in your organisation:

- What is the request/uptake rate of flexible working options for men and women?
- How are the flexible working options offered by your organisation viewed by male and female employees?
- Do managers know how to make flexible working options work for them?
- What are the perceptions of employees regarding the impact of working flexibly on careers in the organisation? It could be that some women are making conscious decisions to remain in grades that allow them to work flexibly rather than focusing on career progression. This may especially be the case if promotion is associated with working longer hours. A lack of flexibility may also prevent flexible workers being able to take up development opportunities.

- What is the reality – are employees who work flexibly promoted (this is different to whether senior employees work flexibly – it may be easier to become a flexible worker than be promoted as a flexible worker).
- How do the needs/desires to work flexibly impact on career paths?

The success/uptake of flexible working options are often dependant on organisational culture. Are those individuals who work flexibly seen as less reliable, less dependable, less hard working? Do you have a culture where the number of hours spent in the office is recognised over and above output? If the answer to these questions is yes, then choosing to take advantage of flexible working could be seen by others as committing career suicide.

Role models

It is often difficult for employees to identify either male or female role models holding positions of responsibility whilst also working flexibly.

It is also interesting to explore the way that senior female role models are perceived by their female counterparts. Research demonstrates, for example, that women who are seen as adopting the same working styles as their male counterparts, such as being assertive, are often described negatively by junior employees, usually as being aggressive.

Some organisations find that introducing female mentors and Women's Networks have been especially helpful in breaking down Old-Boys' Clubs as they help to ensure that key information (which is typically circulated through informal networks – it's not what you know, but who you know) becomes circulated throughout all groups. However, a note of caution should be given when taking such an approach. Firstly, they can be viewed as exclusive and providing unfair benefits, or special treatment, for the people attending the groups. This is especially the case where the purpose of the group or what takes place at the meetings, has not been properly communicated to the wider organisation. Secondly, research suggests that having senior mentors that reflect the demographics of junior mentees, such as a senior female mentor for a junior female mentee, does not offer tangible benefits for the mentee. In essence, this is because simply being in a senior position does not automatically offer a passport to the influential social groups and networks. Minority junior employees may instead find more benefit from being mentored by a senior employee who is part of those networks, rather than simply because they are similar to the mentor in some way such as gender or skin colour.