OUT WITH THE OLD

Why It's Time to Discard Outdated Leadership Advice to Meet Modern Realities

Traditional leadership advice and training models are quickly losing their relevance amid today's hyper-fast pace of change. The former author of _The New York Times'_ Corner Office column shares his vision for the future of leadership, based on interviews with more than 1,000 CEOs, CHROs, and other corporate leaders.

BY ADAM BRYANT

Given the tectonic shifts across the corporate landscape and the world at large since the pandemic, I have become increasingly convinced that the leadership field needs to act on the advice it often shares with others: Disrupt yourself to ensure that you remain relevant and useful for this new era.

To be clear, there is nothing overtly broken about the leadership field. After all, one of its unusual features is that you can say just about anything about leadership, and you will be right on some level.

Another challenging aspect of the field is that it's hard to pin down immutable truths. That's because leadership is more like a kaleidoscope of ever-shifting variables, including the personality of the leader, the personalities of the people being led, and the particular challenge the organization is facing. The idea that some cookie-cutter leadership approach will work in vastly different contexts just doesn't make sense.

All of this puts HR leaders in a difficult position. After all, they are responsible for choosing and advocating for a particular approach—with their CEO, their board, and managers across the company—to develop and assess leaders in their organizations. And they must do it in a way that seems custom-built for their culture, steering clear of trendy buzzwords and the tools and research of yesterday. Unless leadership adapts, the field that serves HR executives risks being seen as not purpose-built for this era.

Benchmarks and Best Practices Belong in the Rearview Mirror

My concern comes from a place of caring deeply about effective leadership, an area I've explored closely for the past 15 years. During that period, I have interviewed more than 1,000 leaders about their key leadership lessons for the Corner Office series I created at *The New York Times* and now continue on LinkedIn. I've also written four books on leadership, including two for Harvard Business Review Press. For the last seven years, I have worked inside companies of all sizes as a consultant, a purview that provides powerful reminders of the critical importance of strong leadership to the long-term success of companies.

My consulting work has also reinforced my sense that there is growing skepticism about the leadership field. In my conversations with HR and talent leaders, C-suite executives, and board directors, I hear many people saying the leadership playbooks and approaches of the past are no longer working. They point out, for example, that the longstanding importance of knowing "best practices" is a rearview-mirror exercise and should be replaced with a focus on developing new approaches.

"I avoid using the term 'benchmark' because I think it's outdated and it's limiting," said Kitty Chaney Reed, chief leadership, culture, and inclusion officer at IBM. "I don't want to be on par with someone else. I want to raise the bar in a way that is informed by, but not limited by, information about what others have done."

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And why, they ask, are many leaders still being assessed against long lists of table-stakes competencies and graded against a historical database of other executives who led in a very different world? The implied level of precision in these assessments isn't realistic, they note.

"I think companies too often overengineer succession in pursuit of an unachievable sense of certainty," said Matt Breitfelder, global head of human capital at Apollo Global Management. "All candidates are a mix of strengths and weaknesses that are pretty easy to sum up. The more interesting question is, are they leaders people want to follow?"

The 4 Main Categories of Outdated Leadership Advice

So how do we raise the bar? It starts by opening up a broader debate and discussion about what good leadership advice looks like and why—and clarifying what approaches have outlived their usefulness. My goal in this article is to examine what "good" looks like in the leadership field and what could benefit from more pressure-testing, so that what rises to the top better serves the HR and talent leaders who are charged with developing the next generation of leaders.

Let's start with the kinds of leadership advice that fall short. What are some approaches that once felt novel and new—and had a good run when the world was a more stable place—but perhaps are no longer purpose-built for this era? What are some approaches that warrant a more skeptical second look?

My list identifies four categories or subgenres of archaic leadership advice:

1 Unpacking, without the insights. The first category consists of frameworks that deconstruct, rather than simplify, the complexity of a leadership challenge. We've all seen those "how-to" articles and white papers that promise a seven-part playbook for navigating some leadership challenge. Too often, they simply unpack the challenge into its component parts without providing any insights on how to move forward effectively.

Is there value in taking apart a challenge so you can work through it in smaller chunks? Sure. But there is a world of difference between deconstructing a problem and offering some topspin advice for how to navigate the challenge.

The field of anatomy provides a useful analogy. Entry-level courses teach about the different parts of the human body. But how do they work together as a system, and what happens when problems start? That is a much more complex and nuanced field of study than simply labeling body parts, which is what we see, in effect, too often in the leadership field today. It may be helpful, but it is not very useful.

2 Unrealistic lessons. The second includes leadership theories that attempt to extract an insight from a particular context but are too rigid, and therefore break down when applied to real-world situations that involve actual human beings operating in contexts with many variables. The culprits include studies that isolate one variable—say, a change in hiring practices—that, voila, led to better performance. We've all seen too many Venn diagrams that aspire to capture leadership in a

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SUCCESSION

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AGILITY

"The speed with which you go from awareness to action determines how great a performer you are. People can spend too much time trying to defend how and why they did everything right but it didn't turn out the right way."

—Wendell Weeks, CEO of Corning

CULTURE

"No matter what people say about culture, it's all tied to who gets promoted, who gets raises, and who gets fired. ... You can have your stated culture, but the real culture is defined by compensation, promotions, and terminations. Basically, people seeing who succeeds and fails in the company defines culture. The people who succeed become role models for what's valued in the organization, and that defines culture."

—Tae Hea Nahm, managing director of venture capital firm Storm Ventures

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few overlapping circles. And again, they are never wrong. But their usefulness is limited, given the gap between how the world should work in theory and how it works in practice.

3 One-size-fits-all statements. A third outdated type of leadership advice is pronouncements about leadership that oversimplify the complexity of a challenge by suggesting a "one thing" approach, as in "Leadership is all about …" You can end that sentence with any number of words—humility, courage, communication, and trust. You can even marshal enough anecdotes and research to argue your "one thing" positions in a book.

But leadership is never about one thing. It's a series of tricky balancing acts and knowing the right response for a particular moment.

4 Word salads and the "Barnum effect." Finally, there's a grab bag of other approaches that lead me to furrow my brow. Like when people try to coin a phrase by putting a new adjective in front of the word "leadership," such as strategic leadership, or human leadership, or positive leadership. The test I apply to these phrases is, "As opposed to what?" Nonhuman leadership? Negative leadership?

Another brow-furrowing approach is when people start using words that few people use in everyday conversation to suggest that they have tapped into a higher conceptual plane, including some of the categories in the Hogan assessment tool, such as "commerce," "affiliation," and "aesthetics."

Speaking of assessments, we should all be wary of anything that smacks of the "Barnum effect," named after showman P.T.

Barnum of Barnum & Bailey Circus. It refers to our tendency to accept certain information as true even when the information is so vague that it's of limited value. Yes, it's useful to know the foundational history of the assessment field, including the five-factor model of personality that evolved decades ago and underpins much of the psychometric field. But it suffers from the same problem of deconstructing complexity that I described earlier.

Human beings are infinitely complex, and so the notion that you can neatly categorize someone's personality and behavior into tidy labels, and then use those to predict their leadership potential, is naïve. They have their place—they are fun icebreakers for team bonding, and they may even help start a conversation about self-awareness. But any veneer of scientific rigor is just that. These are theories and models, and they should carry warning labels for anybody considering using them for serious assessment work.

The Three Currencies of Good Leadership Advice

So what does good leadership look like today? Here is where I set the bar: For leadership advice to be useful, it ideally should check at least two of three boxes (bonus points if it checks all three).

☑ BOX 1: Does it provide an actual insight?

For leadership training and advice to be useful, it should make you feel smarter about how the world works, whether it's about strategy, navigating disruption, human behavior, leading teams, or building corporate culture. The insight should be broadly applicable, not just something that is limited to the narrow context of one company or one leader's experience. The insight can be based on hard-earned wisdom or research, but it should have the feeling of a Swiss Army knife that is useful in many situations and will make you a more effective leader or manager for years to come.

Think of the best leadership insights you've learned over the years. Which are the ones that you've shared time and again when you've coached and mentored others? Those are the insights that get to the essence of a challenge and illuminate it in a way that will guide your thinking in the future.

For example, Tae Hea Nahm, managing director of Storm Ventures, a venture capital firm, forever changed my thinking about how companies create culture, as well as the relative impact of the commonplace exercise of drawing up lists of corporate values. "No matter what people say about culture, it's all tied to who gets promoted, who gets raises, and who gets fired," he said. "You can have your stated culture, but the real culture is defined by compensation, promotions, and terminations. Basically, people seeing who succeeds and fails in the company defines culture. The people who succeed become role models for what's valued in the organization, and that defines culture."

☑ BOX 2: Is there a compelling and memorable story that brings an insight to life?

As human beings, we are wired to remember ideas through stories. They give the insights dimension and texture while making them sticky, memorable, and credible. It's not just something that somebody read in a book. They lived the experience, and the story shows the long-term impact of that insight.

For instance, we've all heard that it's lonely at the top. But the expression doesn't capture the sheer weight of responsibility and accountability that comes with the top job. I think often of the story that Penny Herscher, a veteran tech leader in Silicon Valley, shared with me about stepping into her first chief executive role when she was 36 years old. She thought she was prepared. After all, she had held marketing, business development, and general manager positions at her previous company, and she was comfortable taking on difficult challenges. But that confidence soon evaporated.

"After six months, I realized I had no clue how to be a CEO," Herscher said. "I just kept finding myself in situations where I didn't feel like I had the experience and the tool set to know what to do, and I kept waiting for permission to make decisions."

Then one of her board members took her aside to give her some coaching. "You're looking to the board for permission," he told her. "You need to understand that we're going to give you advice, but you have to make your own decisions. Because if we give you bad advice and you follow it, we'll still fire you."

Herscher's takeaway from that? "It was very clarifying for me to realize, 'OK, this is it. The buck really does stop here.' " That was a huge inflection point for me. I just had to grow up all at once. As CEO, you cannot blame anybody else. You own it."

☑ BOX 3: Is there a tool, tip, framework, technique, or approach for putting an insight into action?

You should feel like you just added something new and powerful to your leadership toolkit that you can use right away, for yourself and for your team.

One of my current favorites came up in an interview with Wendell Weeks, who has been the CEO of Corning for 19 years. Given his long tenure, and the notable growth he led over roughly two decades, I asked him how he scaled himself as a leader and also his organization. His answer provides a powerful approach for dealing with change in just about any context:

"One tool we use when adapting to change is called the 'Triple A Loop.' The acronym AAA stands for awareness, acceptance, and action. It starts with the idea that you have to be aware of the world around you at all times, because you are often wrong. If I'm super-honest with myself, I'm right about 50% of the time when it comes to predicting the future. So you have to be able to change and adapt, especially in today's rapidly evolving business environment. Then the next step, acceptance, is the hardest. It requires humility. Until people accept that they got something wrong, then they can't move to the next step, which is action. The speed with which you go from awareness to action determines how great a performer you are. People can spend too much time trying to defend how and why they did everything right but it didn't turn out the right way."

How HR Can Create a New Leadership Framework

These examples all hit the sweet spot of powerful leadership advice. They are specific but are also broadly applicable. They feel real, rather than theoretical or academic. They are not

didactic or overly prescriptive. They are the ideal source material for how we all learn to lead—by piecing together lessons from what we experience ourselves and learn from others.

The best leadership advice is, in essence, wisdom. It slows down the world around you and provides confidence that you know how a particular situation is likely to play out. Even better, it gives you the tools to help steer the outcome.

For the HR leaders who are responsible for developing the leadership frameworks in their organization, what's the playbook for developing a meaningful set of insights, stories, and frameworks that will be adopted by leaders and managers across the organization and help drive performance and results? The risk, of course, is falling into the trap of management by anecdote. The last thing an organization needs is for the CEO to return from an external meeting, eager to adopt some insight they just heard as a new foundational pillar for the company.

The process of crafting real-world leadership development needs to be more intentional, starting with a blank slate and important questions that can only be answered in context:

- What are the leadership X factors that will help our company win in the future?
- What aspects of the culture need to be reinforced because they are a competitive advantage?
- What cultural weaknesses do we have that require an explicit counterweight to encourage new behaviors?
- What does every member of our top leadership team believe are the most effective insights, stories, and frameworks that will help drive performance at the company? (Push them for specifics to understand what their answers mean in practice.)
- What are the patterns and common themes among their answers?

From those conversations, you should be able to understand initial gaps in perception, articulation, or actual leadership perspectives, then derive the core insights and frameworks to put those insights into action and drive a new level of alignment. In effect, you are helping your organization create a leadership culture, not just develop its individual leaders.

To help communicate this set of expectations (and make them stick), ask everyone on the leadership team for their own personal stories that connect to these ideas and help bring them to life, which in turn will help them cascade these ideas throughout the organization.

To test whether these insights will land well with all employees, bring together focus groups across the organization to get their input before rolling out the ideas more broadly. The entire process is largely driven by gathering qualitative data that will help ensure that the ultimate leadership framework you choose feels built by and for your organization's unique context and culture. And you will have helped do it in a systemic way.

Done right, the payoff will be to provide your company with a metaphorical centerboard of a sailboat—to keep your organization on track amid all the waves, winds, and currents that threaten to throw you off course.

That's how Wendell Weeks helped scale Corning over two decades with his "Triple A Loop" framework of awareness, acceptance, and action. That's how Satya Nadella helped shift

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Microsoft from a culture of "know-it-alls" to "learn-it-alls." That's how Jeff Bezos kept the innovation engine humming at Amazon with his idea of "Day 1" thinking.

Insights. Stories. Frameworks. Tools. Long before leadership blogs, books, podcasts, consulting firm white papers, and Ph.D. programs in leadership, this is how human beings learned from one another. People shared lessons, the stories of how they learned them, and what they did differently because of those lessons.

We need to get back to that tried and true and intuitive approach to sharing leadership advice, and we need to let go of theoretical, cookie-cutter, and pseudo-scientific models. After all, this profession has a crucial mission and purpose: to better prepare leaders to take on the challenges of today and tomorrow.

To meet the moment, the leadership field has to keep adapting and innovating, partly by casting off old approaches that don't work anymore. It's time to change the conversation. ▪

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