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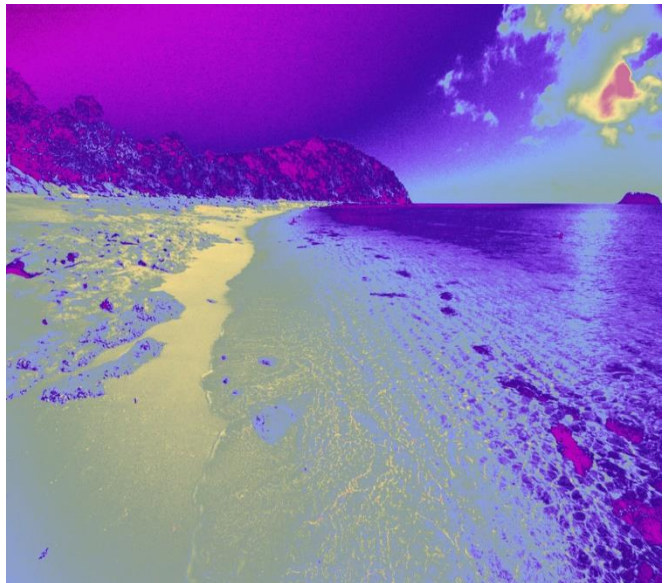
THRIVING AS A TECHNICAL LEADER

Sustaining the passion and getting the job done - with and through others

INTRODUCTION

It's a well-worn refrain:

"He has been promoted to a senior role on account of his technical excellence

"But now is really struggling because his technical strength is not matched by his leadership capability".

In most cases, you could reasonably add the words "of course" after this statement.

It's only in very rare cases that you find new technical leaders have received as much support and development for the leadership aspect of their role as they have received, over the years, in developing their specialist skills.

Regardless of whether your professional world is one of engineering, IT, the law, architecture, health services, accounting, finance or one of many other 'technical' arenas, **the challenge of shifting from an almost exclusive orientation towards diagnosis, design, building and implementing solutions to one that involves leading other people requires you to 'know' different things, 'be' different, and 'do' things differently.**

And it requires a capacity to function well in an environment which appears, and often is, less ordered, more fluid and much more likely to be rendered in black and grey than in black and white.

Effective leadership of technical teams by technical experts creates competitive advantage - in the competition for your customer's interest and affection, and in the competition for the best talent. ***And it enables those leaders to enjoy their roles so much more.***

This paper identifies easily-accessible strategies and tips for technical leaders to help them embrace their roles, and thrive.

Tips and strategies to grow and thrive as a technical leader

- **Ensure you have role clarity.** Be clear on what the **role of a leader** is (in any setting). This sounds very much like a statement of the obvious, however when we challenge leaders to write something down to define their roles, as a leader, we often find people struggle to distil the essence of the role into a simple statement. Some combination of setting direction, delivering the results that matter, and mobilising people picks up the core elements.

- **Make sure you actually <u>want</u> to be a leader** – for the right reasons.

  This means holding a view that being a leader is:

  (i)   worthwhile (makes a difference and supports your career goals and opportunities),
  (ii)   enjoyable, and
  (iii)   not something that will cause you to lose your technical edge or passion

  Asking 'why' in relation to each of these three viewpoints can be a very helpful exercise.

- **Develop a well-grounded belief that you can be effective as a leader.**

  This will require you to challenge limiting beliefs and biases (expressed through your self-talk) and embracing positive beliefs about leadership and your capacity to grow in this aspect of your role.

  This belief is helped by an understanding that leadership can be learned – and that much of success in the role hinges on awareness (or consciousness) of what being a leader means.

  Leaders also benefit from an honest exploration of their own belief levels, and those of their team members, about the prospects of their goals being achieved.

  You'll usually find a few things that drive belief, and a few things that may be getting in the way. Exploring these in a properly facilitated way, and then leveraging the drivers and actioning/mitigating the blockers of belief can have a hugely beneficial impact. It's great to have a vision and strategy and worthwhile purpose etc. but if the belief around those is not solid you'll be slowed down.

- **Build solid levels of self-awareness about your leadership 'style',** and how this is perceived by the people around you.

  This enables you to assess the aspects of your style that work, how you react under "pressure triggers", and any aspects you'd benefit from changing or adjusting to give yourself a better shot at delivering the results you seek.

Tips and strategies to grow and thrive as a technical leader

- **Be aware of high levels of perfectionistic patterns** in your thoughts, decisions about where you spend your time, and behaviour – and in those of your team.

  The technical professions place great emphasis on precision, as the impact of getting things wrong can be, or appear to be, significant.

 > ## You can't be long in agility and long in perfectionism.

  When over-played, the thoughts and behaviours that emanate from high levels of conditioned perfectionism really get in way of higher levels of achievement and stronger customer-centric orientation.

  Two antidotes are recommended if you have the perfectionism bug.

  Firstly – build greater self awareness about it – including an appreciation for the triggers that cause you to over-invest your time and energy in pursuit of a 102% level of precision.

  Secondly – generate an active appreciation of who your stakeholders are, and what they really value. Focusing on what they really value helps you apply your effort where it matters most. A good litmus test for identifying overly perfectionistic behaviour is the extent to which people get involved in regular and good-quality conversations with their stakeholders (rather than just keep their heads buried in their computers and other devices).

   Leaders in technical teams benefit enormously from understanding the subtle but critical difference between a strong perfectionistic style and a strong achievement style –and how to coach people to build the latter, and let go of the former.
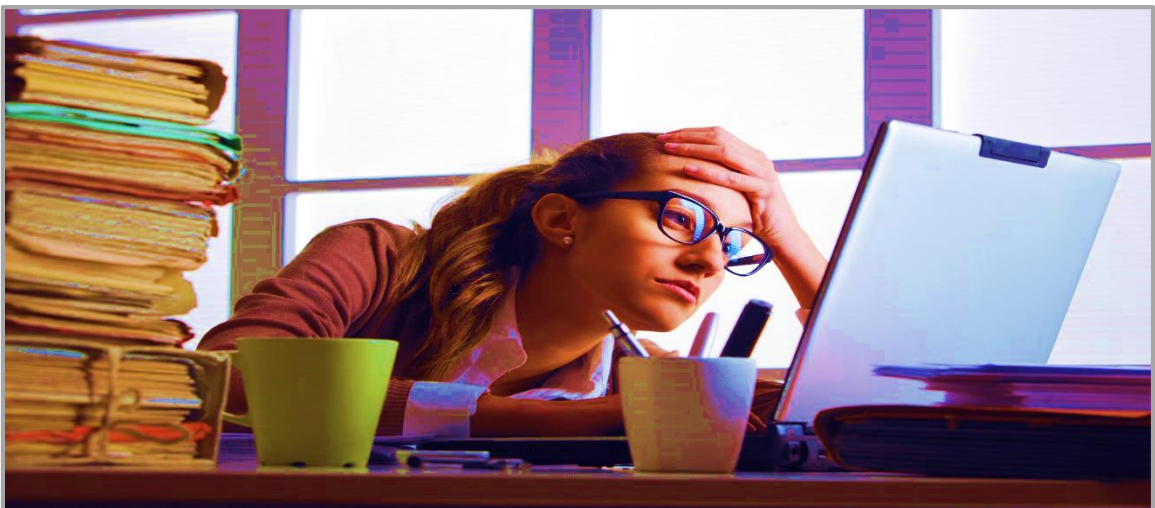
Tips and strategies to grow and thrive as a technical leader

- **Explore the dimensions of trust** (in your team and between your team and your customers – internal or external)

  Trust is often talked about in much too generic a way. Its presence is especially important in fast paced, complex, highly-accountable, inter-dependent, agile technical environments. People need to feel safe when stretching, making changes and proposing new ideas.

  We use the Maister Green Trust Equation model to move trust from an amorphous concept, often mistakenly limited to notions of honesty, into a clearly definable and assessable concept.

  The four components of the equation are Credibility, Reliability, Intimacy (the numerators) and perception of Self Interest (the denominator). You can easily examine and assess these with your team and identify behaviours and language that raise the numerators and lower the denominator.

- **Be comfortable feeling uncomfortable** – this is perfectly natural as you let go of a high technical focus and take on more leadership responsibility. It's likely you'll feel more exposed and be challenged to change some old habits that have worked for you in the past.

  Doing different things, especially before a demanding audience, always feels uncomfortable at the beginning. But repeated practice in doing the right things will move you closer to consistently and naturally great performance.

  Sometimes you may feel that doing things differently leaves you feeling inauthentic or you may be inclined to rationalise not trying different approaches by saying it's not the 'real you'. It's very important to remember, that *feeling* like it is not the 'real you' doesn't mean it isn't or can't be the 'real you'.

  Debriefing your critical leadership interactions with a trusted colleague will also help accelerate your comfort being in the spotlight as a leader and your leadership development.

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As a technical leader, you
don't have to master all the skills at once

A focus on two **I**'s, two **C**'s and two **L**'s will go a long way:

Is

- ❑ **Inspiring**

and

- ❑ **Influencing**

Cs

- ❑ **Clarity**

and

- ❑ **Communication**

Ls

- ❑ **Leverage**

and

- ❑ **Learning**

The two Is - Influence & Inspiration

In Zenger Folkman's 'Extraordinary Leader' research, the ability to inspire and motivate was identified, statistically, as the leadership competency that has the highest correlation to extraordinary individual and team performance.

The ability to deliver *inspiration* is, like leadership more generally, one of those capabilities that is easy to place in the category of 'you've either got it or you haven't'. We don't subscribe to this view

We recommend newly-appointed technical leaders adopt the following approach as they think about the inspiration part of their role:

- *Write down 10 things that people you have worked for during your career have done which you found to be inspiring in a work context.*

- *Then talk to your peers and managers, and ask them to identify five things that they have found most inspiring as they reflect on their professional journeys.*

- *You now have a list of 15 things that inspire you and others. From this list select the five you feel would resonate most strongly with your team – and put these in order from the easiest for you to do to the most challenging.*

- *Then focus on the top 3 on your list. Make sure you can express them in straight-forward actions and write those actions down so that you can easily and regularly see them at work.*

- *Tell a peer or colleague what you're targeting, so they can periodically check in with you on your progress.*

Influencing is really internal selling – whether it's selling your ideas, initiatives, proposals and funding needs, or clearing the way forward, for your team effective leaders understand how to read their audience, connect with them and structure their message and delivery to move things along.

Influence can be learned. What some people do instinctively can easily be developed and applied in a simple, systematic manner.

The two Cs – Clarity & Communication

Clarity failure is the most common 'fail point' for leaders.

As a technical leader you need to be clear, at a suitably rich level, about:

- ✓ Your performance context (market conditions, how your business competes, trends, organisational strategies etc)
- ✓ Your individual and team goals
- ✓ Your own role and everyone's role in the team
- ✓ The pathways and risk/dependencies to achieve those goals
- ✓ Where their team are at any time
- ✓ What are the two or three performance 'ingredients' that you most have to nail to achieve the goals.

Critically, all the leaders in your network have to be on the same page about your goals – and about what these goals mean in terms of their own behaviour and communication. Unless this clarity is shared across the senior group, your team members will get a different sense of your goals, and the behaviours and priorities needed to achieve them, from every different leadership interaction they experience. And that inconsistency greatly diminishes clarity, and really slows you down.

"Clarity failure is the most common 'fail point' for leaders"

Leaders are always **communicating** – and as much with their behaviour and decision making as with their words.

Technical leaders benefit from reflecting on the role of communication in achieving their goals – and the most effective form of communication (which will generally not be email).

Great communicators take the time to understand their audience and then **embrace an objective-based approach** to their verbal and written communication. They are clear on what they'd like the people with whom they are communicating to **think, feel and do** as a consequence of each major interaction.

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The two Ls – Leverage & Learning

Achieving goals that are bigger than individuals can achieve on their own is the essence of leadership.

This involves leaders **leveraging** their:

- Energy
- Sense of direction
- Insight
- Experience
- Networks
- Resilience
- Cultural role modelling

 with and through others.

We encourage you as a technical leader to consider what leverage means to you in the context of their roles and goals. We then suggest they document those things they can leverage for the benefit of their team and goals – and how they'll achieve this multiplying impact.

Adopting a coaching mindset is an important part of how leaders achieves leverage – but there are other dimensions that also need focus – not least, the capacity to build a healthy team dynamic.

Finally, leaders who adopt a strong continual **learning mindset** and **behaviour** glean many personal and organisational benefits, including:

- Practised humility ("I don't pretend I know it all") creates greater empathy
- Openness to new ideas for continuous improvement and innovation - and greater flexibility in adopting them
- Genuine interest in others – creating higher levels of engagement
- Encourages others to learn and grow – creating higher levels of capability across the team

Peer discussions are usually very fruitful for technical leaders - both in sharing learning from experiences, and in identifying potential learning areas and options.

SOME OF THE THINGS WE'VE LEARNED FROM OUR WORK WITH HIGH-PERFORMING TECHNICAL LEADERS

Great technicians can become great leaders. It does not require super-human power.

They recognise that taking time out of their week to reflect on how they are travelling as a leader (rather than manager or technician), and what their leadership priorities should be for the next two weeks, reaps a very good reward.

They are effective in keeping the leadership conversation alive around the leadership table.

They take time to really understand what makes them tick the way they do. And they acknowledge that this provides the capacity to (a) tweak any aspects of their style that they'd like to change, and (b) to really understand what makes others tick.

They set clear goals for their leadership performance, in the same way they do for the other aspects of their work.

YOU CAN DO IT !

People with strong technical and project management expertise command natural respect. They have well-developed reasoning and decision-making skills. They learn fast, are typically problem-solvers and builders, and they often possess great market and customer insight.

Balancing a leadership focus with technical expertise can require the acquisition of some new skills, knowledge and mindsets. But these are all very accessible.

Where you bring the same rigour and commitment that created your technical excellence to the execution of your leadership role, the impact and enjoyment of leading of others will progressively develop to be equally as positive as that associated with your technical work – if that's what you want.

ADDRESS

Level 32, 101 Miller Street, North Sydney NSW 2060

TELEPHONE

+61 2 9959 2354

EMAIL

info@magentaperformance.com

WEB

www.magentaperformance.com