

Death of Deference

What does it mean to be an inclusive leader?



The traditional “hero” model of leadership may have worked before, but it is broken. In a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world, deference is no longer a given.

This death of deference doesn’t exist in a vacuum – it might be seen as a symptom of the **absence of appreciation** that has become the de facto standard of leadership. This is not just a lack of acknowledgement, but also a lack of appreciation for the breadth of talent, depth of feeling, and individual experience that people bring to work with them.

“Systems of deference create ‘them and us’ cultures; they divide rather than unite people within organisations... The more deference there is, the narrower the band of judgements on which organisations rely.”

– Robin Ryde, author of *Never Mind the Bosses*

The old-style leadership model is not unlike a critical parent. Approval is sought from the leader and can be withdrawn at any time. “Do as I say, not as I do,” becomes a tagline for their operating methods, and respect is given, not earned.

An example of this is the pace-setting leader. This leader is experienced; a legend in their own mind - others are expected to follow their lead and match their pace. As such, they have a set plan of attack from what’s worked before. This style of leadership has its place; however, it can disempower employees. More importantly, “I am the expert” is not a vulnerable approach to leadership. Vulnerability is important to the inclusive leader.

It’s appropriate here to give our definition of vulnerability, in that there is a difference between showing vulnerability and being vulnerable. Business can feel defensive, and traditional leadership models encourage leaders to keep distance between themselves and their employees. Who knows: you may need to fire someone at the end of the quarter.

I’m reluctant to use a football metaphor here as they can be exclusionary or divisive. However, the most obvious example is Jose Mourinho’s leadership of Manchester United. Mourinho christened himself “the special one” and saw himself as a hero – and indeed, had huge successes. Nonetheless, he became unable to engage his team to release their potential, or to count on them for their loyalty. New manager Ole Gunnar Solskjær, on the other hand, sees himself as an inclusive leader and is there to support and coach the team. He creates the space necessary for his team to create in.

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As I've mentioned in previous blog posts, part of our ethos at Maynard Leigh Associates is to promote humanity at work. Our cultural idea of "professionalism" puts a wall between the self we bring to work and our authentic self, and it encourages others to do the same. However, in order to get the most out of people – their creativity, their engagement, their purpose – they need to be encouraged to bring in their whole self. That may mean that people bring parts of themselves that you don't want, such as their unreasonableness, their insecurities, and their issues. But isn't that what makes us human?

By opening your leadership style to become more approachable and inclusive, you can encourage your people to do the same. There is a distinction to be made between leading from the front – like the pace-setting leader – and leading from the middle, where you are more accessible and more involved. Here you can place more of an emphasis on treating people with humanity, respect, and equanimity. Sharing insecurities, admitting weaknesses, and making your emotions available to others allows them to feel validated to ask questions, or feel differently about how to get where you're going.

"It doesn't make sense to hire smart people and tell them what to do;
we hire smart people so they can tell us what to do."

– Steve Jobs

Twelve years ago, we were shown first-hand that banks were fallible with the 2007 financial crash. Recent international elections have proven that we trust experts less. Fake news is rife and established media outlets can no longer be expected to tell us the truth. Perhaps then it's not surprising that deference for institutions is declining rapidly. We've seen how institutions treat people, we've seen scandals and corruptions from our leaders, and respect has been withdrawn.

The death of deference doesn't have to mean that we as leaders should be disrespected, or without any authority. I would argue we, as a whole, may need to relearn how to treat people with the best intentions, rather than immediately dismissing those in power. At the same time, we need to recognise that being CEO of a company holds less status than it did before.

The respect we will earn is in direct correlation with the respect we are able to give. As an inclusive leader, we must create deep connections with our people through honest conversation and an invitational relationship.