

# Leadership development challenges

An overview of the past,  
present, future and the myths



Buzzacott

# Leadership development challenges – an overview of the past, present, future and the myths

---

Given today's complex and dynamic business environment, with leaders expected to keep up with the fast changing tides, how are those tasked with overseeing leadership development coping? How do the challenges of today compare to those of the past, and what does the future hold?

Here we explore the past, present, future and the myths of leadership development.

The findings and opinions in our series of leadership development insights are based on our 2016 leadership roundtable and leadership development survey.

---

Figure 1.0  
Words most used  
by the participants  
of Buzzacott's  
leadership  
development survey



# Buzzacott

Leadership  
development  
challenges

## Past

A lot has changed over the last few years, that much is clear. In the past organisations were very much led from the front, with research showing that a person in a position of authority was automatically presumed to be in a leadership role. There was no clear distinction between the roles of leaders and managers, except that leadership was, generally, stereotyped as being autocratic and directive in style. Fast-forward to the current era of leadership and this stereotype has been turned on its head. Leaders today are more likely to be collaborative, democratic and to be concerned with strategy. Top-down management and strict rules no longer appear to compliment or align with the general working culture of the

present day. It seems that in order for leadership to be impactful, individuals should be more holistic in their approach, both endeavouring to take into account the needs of the business and tailoring their style to best support it, while understanding and responding to the requirements of their workforce.

When asked what the biggest leadership challenge was for HR leaders five years ago, 36% of our survey participants said 'finding the right leader' (Figure. 1.1). The focus was not on developing leaders as such, it was about finding leaders who fit the objectives of the business, not the people.

“ Recruitment was focused more on the operational, business as usual. There did not appear to be the staffing issues there are now. ”

*Buzzacott's leadership development survey respondent, 2016*

Figure 1.1  
Participants  
response to the  
question 'What  
were the biggest  
leadership  
challenges five years  
ago?'



*Buzzacott's leadership development survey, 2016*

## Present

Globalisation has brought to light the need for businesses to adapt to different styles and cultures when addressing development – the 'one size fits all' model may not necessarily be the right answer anymore.

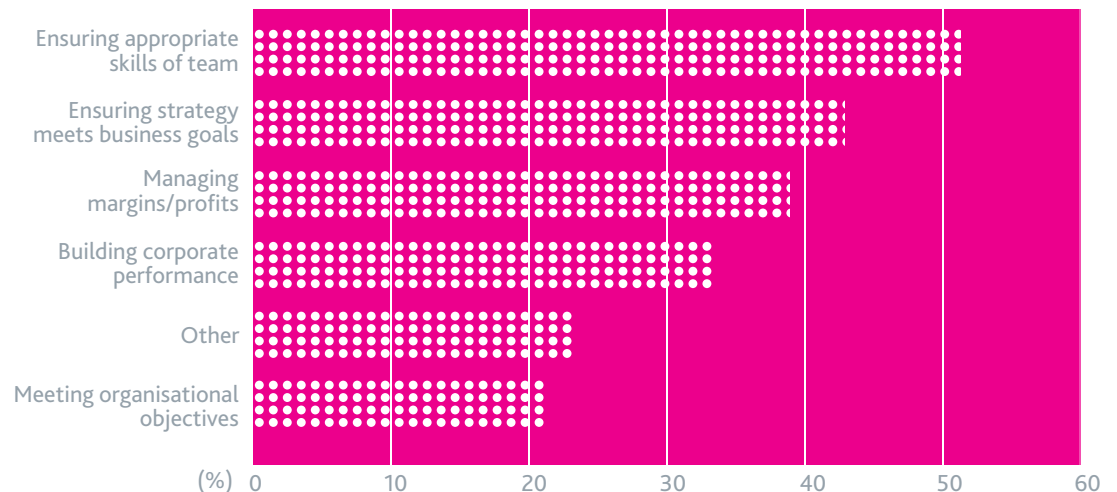
Adapting to such change has meant that leaders now need new skills to cope with the international mix of their staff and the cultural norms they have.

While there are concerns about the rate of digital advancements amongst the UK's HR and L&D leaders and the changes to work and skills required because of technology, over 50% of our survey respondents voted that their biggest challenge was ensuring that their teams have the appropriate skills to do their jobs well (Figure. 1.2).

Leaders are increasingly turning their attention to their people, voicing concerns about the capabilities of their people which, in turn, is resulting in a greater focus on

developing future leaders. The difference between generations X,Y and Z is also posing challenges. When asked whether they had to change their approach to L&D as a result of the rise of the millennial and "Generation Y", a resounding 63% answered 'yes'. Organisations and leaders alike are starting to recognise the need to develop tailored managerial styles for the different age demographics making up their leadership as a whole. Gone are the days when employee loyalty to the company was an implicit relationship, where working for an organisation for 20 or even 40 years was commonplace. Millenials have made 'job hopping' the norm, it is expected of them, meaning that companies now have to adapt to different generations and ensure that engagement, retention and talent development plans are focused for each and every group.

Figure 1.2  
Participants  
response to the  
question 'What  
are the greatest  
leadership  
challenges of  
today?'



## Future

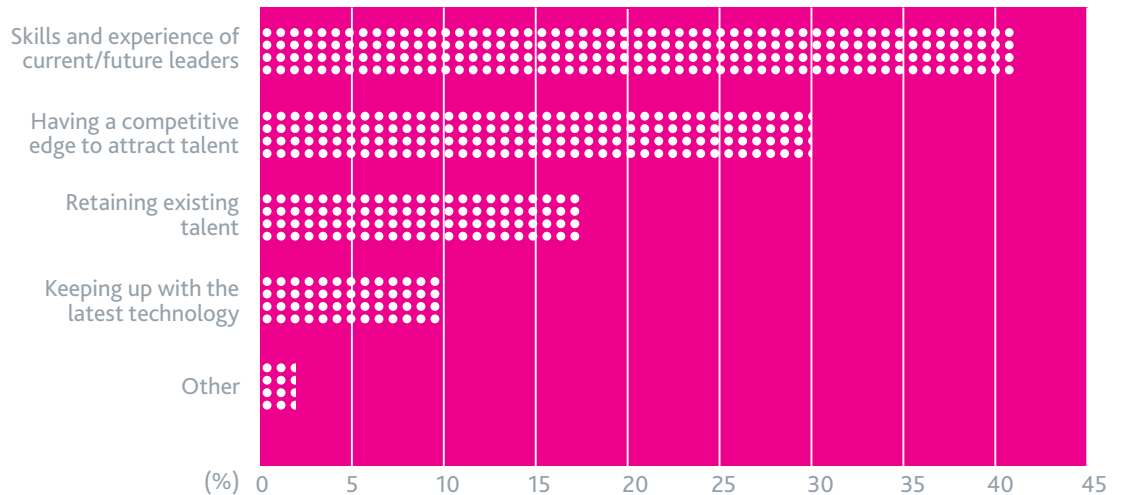
Upon being asked about the future and what they predict would be the biggest leadership challenge in the next five to ten years, over 85%\* of our survey respondents gave an answer that focused on their people, their needs, their wants and their demands (Figure. 1.3).

In future, organisations anticipate being expected to develop the right methods to enable leaders to be effective. To combat fluid workforces, organisations should consider building long-term development plans and programmes so that their leadership teams are aligned with and invested in their objectives. These plans should focus on keeping up with evolving trends and empowering individuals to make informed, considered decisions and take appropriate action without first contending with layers and layers of process or protocol.

This approach to development is presently taking root and looks to be a clear focus in the future. Although the mould of the perfect leader will differ from organisation to organisation, what is clear is that in order to achieve the role of an effective leader, they must have the skills and ability to motivate and effectively influence their people.

Controversial as it may seem, one of the key outcomes of our survey was getting leaders to understand that in order to become effective leaders, they need to take ownership of their own development. Employers are seeking driven leaders who can demonstrate a personal commitment to their own development.

Figure 1.3  
Participants  
response to the  
question 'What will  
likely be the biggest  
leadership challenge  
in the next five to  
ten years?'



Buzzacott's leadership development survey, 2016

\* Combination of responses to figure.1.3

## The myths

During the course of our research we came across many common misconceptions about the world of leadership development. However, in the context of the past, present and future landscape, two in particular emerged consistently.

### 1 Having a title makes you a leader

As we have already touched upon, just having the title of a manager or a leader does not automatically equip individuals with the skills to successfully lead. In many situations people follow management because they have to, however the best kind of scenario would be where people follow because they want to. The actions of a leader can equally motivate and demotivate employees.

Forward-thinking organisations already recognise their obligation to support leaders with their development. As one respondent said, *"you need to have a development plan and training that is continual. You need to provide the training necessary for the lack (of skills) the leadership currently has."* In reality, successful leaders are those that recognise their strengths and weaknesses in motivating staff, and take ongoing steps towards self-improvement while bearing in mind the key issues of technology, globalisation and wide range of generations to be catered for.

### 2 HR is braced for the future

We have outlined a number of challenges anticipated in future. The widespread recognition that these challenges loom could reasonably lead us to believe that HR functions across the UK are putting in place plans to prepare for their impact. However, the results of our survey showed that this doesn't always seem to be the case. Rather, their focus is still very much on current skills to deal with today's challenges. As one participant said, *"too often we try to develop skills we need today – by the time those skills are developed, those people need new ones!"*

Leaders are focusing on the short-term outlook, rather than investing in the development of skills fit for the future landscape. While it is important for leaders to "keep a finger on the pulse", the future should always be kept in mind. The leaders of today are, after all, responsible for shaping the leaders of tomorrow.

Figure 1.4.  
Top three things  
most HR functions  
are not fully  
prepared for



## Stay tuned...

In the next of our series of leadership development challenges insights, we take a look at 'Leadership – what it means for the people and organisation.'