



# Leadership Code: Increasing Effectiveness and Impact at Different Levels

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Over ten years ago, RBL laid out The Leadership Code, a simple model which we feel captures the foundational elements of good leadership practice. This model has since been implemented in organizations of varying sizes around the world, customized to create unique Leadership Brands, and expanded to include behavioral descriptors for six different levels of leadership—from individual contributors leading themselves to executives leading some of the world's largest companies.

Last year, we pulled data from over 13,000 global leaders and over 80,000 rater data points collected over the past ten years to look at how the Leadership Code varies at these different levels. What exactly is different about the work of an executive? A middle manager? A front-line

leader? This article summarizes these findings.

## Front-Line Leadership

The term front-line leader is used here to describe anyone who is leading a team of individual contributors, regardless of the content of that work. In most organizations, front-line leaders make up the vast majority of the leadership population, receive the least development support, and often have the most direct impact on both employees and customers. In looking at the data, we found seven unique groupings of front-line leadership behaviors.

First, they build the workforce. They develop the talent on their team but with an eye to the future—looking for ways to develop promising employees in the

context of what tomorrow's critical roles will be. They provide resources to make sure they can develop and perform in their current roles. They coach their team members on what they need to do to succeed and act as a talent magnet—drawing people with the skills and competencies into the organization and retaining them.

Second, they deliver results. They make decisions, drive change, create accountability, monitor progress, and provide feedback. They communicate consistently and focus their time and their team's time on the right priorities.

Third, they are authentic. They live by a moral code and are trusted by others. They also genuinely believe what they do is important and adds value and are able to maintain energy and passion for their work. This trust and genuine commitment

to the goals of the organization is essential for high-producing organizations; it enables performance well beyond the norm and (at the same time) the growth of high potential people.

Fourth, they resolve complex issues. They can see the bigger picture, cut quickly to the heart of issues, and make tough decisions. At this level, this likely suggests the ability to see the path ahead and help the team/group transition smoothly forward from completion of today's work to what must be started tomorrow.

Fifth, they are steady and predictable. Even when the going gets tough, they don't get frustrated. They are resilient, open to feedback, and create a positive work environment.

Sixth, they are curious. They seek out information and new ideas.

Seventh, they connect employees to the organization's strategic direction. They can describe the organization's goals in ways that inspire and engage employees and are more likely to have or articulate a point of view about how the future will impact the organization.

## Mid-Level Leadership

The term mid-level leaders refers broadly to leaders who have direct reports with teams of their own. It is a challenging leadership space in most organizations. These leaders are charged with working cooperatively to make the discrete parts of the organization work well together. Mid-level leaders have to understand the strategic intent of executive leaders, align systems and processes internally to that direction, and make sure they are delivering the expected results.

In looking at the data we again found seven groupings of mid-level leader behaviors. Many are similar to the front-line leader behaviors but with unique implications.

First, as for front-line leaders, mid-level leaders must build the workforce. This is a wider-ranging notion for mid-level leaders than for front-line leaders. It includes all the future-oriented development, coaching, and understanding of future critical roles described above. In addition, however, are behaviors relating to facilitating collaboration and networking within the organization, creating alignment and support for

future directions, and building a positive work environment. This wider-ranging notion reflects the bridging role mid-level leaders play between executive and front-line leaders and their wider scope of responsibility and influence. It also suggests that the development of other leaders is a more complex phenomenon than the development of individual contributors. It requires development not just of technical skills but also of a broader understanding of the context that they are operating in. It also requires the same authentic respect for and trust in others that enables performance well beyond the norm and the growth of high potential people.

Second, mid-level leaders need to deliver results. As for front-line leaders, mid-level leaders must establish accountability, make sure decisions get made, monitor and guide progress, drive change, and focus on the right things. The step-change between front-line leaders and mid-level leaders is in how to create accountability, ensure quality and timely decision-making, drive change, etc. in the face of the increased scope and scale of the work they are overseeing and an increased distance from the most of the individuals in their organization.

Third, mid-level leaders resolve complex issues. Compared to front-line leaders, mid-level leaders face many problems that don't have straightforward solutions. This includes the ability to see the bigger picture, cut quickly to the heart of issues, and make tough decisions. Many solutions could work and it is in understanding the future direction that allows them to make the right decisions. It is also more often the case for mid-level leaders that they need to bring in new ideas, novel approaches, and outside thinking in order to solve the problems they face.

Fourth, mid-level leaders seek feedback. The complexity of the issues and problems mid-level leaders face also surfaces the importance of being open to feedback. Seeking feedback from others helps mid-level leaders manage their strengths and weaknesses to avoid getting in the way of their organizations. In addition, mid-level leaders need to seek out, understand, and incorporate external stakeholder/customer feedback in order to know how to best coordinate and differentially invest in the work of different groups.

Fifth, mid-level leaders behave ethically. Mid-level leaders need to live by a moral code and must not tolerate unethical behavior in others. The trust they engender greases all the wheels—in coaching and mentoring others, in getting timely information, and in getting groups within the organization to work together for a common goal. (Read more about trust [here](#).)

Sixth, mid-level leaders maintain composure. Mid-level leaders experience significant stress and are often required to navigate conflicting information and direction. They must be able to manage difficult situation without frustration, maintain composure even in extremely stressful situations, and recover quickly from setbacks.

Seventh, mid-level leaders demonstrate personal commitment. Consistent with our high potential findings, mid-level leaders must be engaged. They need to care about the work they do, believe in it, and show commitment and energy to achieve the organization's goals. While for front-line leaders, these behaviors were folded into authenticity—a blend of being ethical and moral and caring about what you do, for mid-level leaders demonstrating personal commitment is important in its own right.

## Executive Leadership

The term executive leaders refers broadly to leaders who are charged with directing the work of the organization so that it succeeds in a competitive world and delivers on stakeholder expectations. Executive leaders have to understand the complex and evolving external environment and set a clear and achievable direction for the organization in the face of uncertainty and ambiguity.

In looking at the data for executives, we again found seven groupings of leader behaviors—some unique, some overlapping with other levels of leadership.

First, as for front-line leaders and mid-level leaders, executive leaders must build the workforce. The behaviors for executives include those described above for mid-level leaders (with greater emphasis on future talent pools) but include an additional broadening of the concept to include three additional elements. Executive leaders must maintain an updated picture of what future talent needs will be—what are

the talent implications of future strategic directions. Second, executive leaders need to personally invest their time in helping key employees develop and advance. Finally, executive leaders need to make sure their own team is performing well. It is in the people of the organization that the technical and social capabilities that will make or break the strategy reside. By being personally involved in communicating what talent matters in what roles, evaluating and developing that talent, and engaging and connecting that talent to the goals of the organization, executive leaders create the conditions for strategy to come to fruition.

Second, executive leaders resolve complex issues. Even more important at the executive level is the ability to think analytically and creatively and to use those cognitive skills to make good decisions. Their rich mental models about the external and internal environment enable executives to see the patterns and second and third order effects that enable good decision making in ambiguous and volatile contexts. This allows executives to see the bigger picture in a mass of detail, cut quickly to the heart of complex issues, and to make good decisions and set a clear path for future opportunities. Resolving complex issues at the executive level also includes creative thinking that allows novel ways to solve problems or identify opportunities to surface.

Third, executive leaders deliver results. Executives still need to deliver results and are accountable for the results their organization delivers. This requires attention to the same concepts as front-line leaders and mid-level leaders attend to—accountability, driving change, decision-making, and communication. Here again, the step-change is in the increased scope and scale of the groups they need to establish these behaviors in. Instead of overseeing accountability, change, decision-making, etc. in individuals they know and interact with, they are creating systems and processes that affect hundreds, thousands, and even hundreds of thousands of people. The behaviors needed to monitor the work in progress of a whole organization are markedly different than those needed to monitor the work in progress of a content writing team or even an advertising group.

An additional complication for executives in delivering results is the need to balance delivering short-term results with making good bets on what would work (be a good objective to have achieved) in a relatively distant time frame. Only if they have targets can they set pathways to achieve these more distant goals. Many executives fail because they don't know what to measure, and either spend precious resources getting information they can't actually use, or miss key indicators that have system lag times of three to five years.

Fourth, executive leaders have a positive outlook. Given the public accountability for results to external stakeholders in the face of unpredictable complex events and their public role inside and outside the organization, executives can only expect difficult circumstances, failures, and frustrations. (Read more about positive outlook here.) Executive leaders need to be able to not only maintain composure and not give in to frustration, but also to recover from setbacks quickly. They also need to trust and be trusted and create a positive environment that enables responsive problem solving.

Fifth, executive leaders demonstrate personal commitment. As with mid-level leaders, though slightly more important given their more prominent role in the organization and the personal sacrifices generally required at the executive level, executive leaders need to show their passion for what they do, believe it is important and adds value, and demonstrate commitment and energy to achieving the organization's goals. If they don't, others won't be willing to make the effort needed for the organization's success.

Sixth, executive leaders seek feedback. Given the power executives have, their ability to avoid executive isolation and proactively seek and hear feedback is critical to the long-term success of the organization. Executive leaders who are open and curious about what others inside and outside the organization think, and how well things are going, have better and more realistic understanding of where the organization currently is and can make more timely course corrections to adjust. They also tend to make better decisions because they get more diverse and challenging input to their thinking [see also this

piece by Jerry Useem in *The Atlantic* that captures the challenges for executives].

Seventh, executive leaders behave ethically. As for seeking feedback, the executive behaviors around behaving ethically are more narrowly defined than for other levels in the organization. Not tolerating unethical behavior in others and consistently living by a moral code appear to be more table stakes here—an acknowledgment that unethical behavior tolerated or perpetrated by an executive creates liability that can threaten the foundation of the whole organization.

## Conclusions

While there are clear differences in the leadership requirements at different levels in an organization, there are also some key themes that are consistent across levels. Some may not be surprising, but others we believe indicate some shifts in the expectations of leaders.

The leader's responsibility to create the conditions for their group to deliver results is consistent across levels. All three levels find behaviors related to accountability, driving change, communication, decision-making, and monitoring progress grouped together and fairly significant. What changes across levels is how to implement these across a gradually increasing size of organization. These are skills that should be taught to front-line leaders, reinforced to mid-level leaders and placed in a larger context. Executives, on the other hand, need to understand the trade-offs in different systems and processes for supporting these practices—understanding that is often gained through experiences with different systems and processes over time or across organizations.

From the data, build the workforce is the dominant domain explaining leadership effectiveness at all levels in the organization. Building on the revolutionary notion of a "Human Capital Developer" from the original Leadership Code book, this grouping of behaviors is consistent in its long-term focus across levels. The #1 job of leaders at all levels in any organization is to know what talent is needed for the future and be actively and personally involved in growing and retaining that talent. As with delivering results, the size and scope of the group of future leaders

a leader is building for/from is one of the key variations across levels. Another difference is in the time horizon associated with the word “future.” Future likely varies from front-line leaders who are typically looking 1-3 years out to mid-level leaders looking 3-6 years out to executives looking 6-20+ years out (depending on the industry, size, and the growth strategy of the organization).

Resolving complex issues—issues that the members of the team cannot resolve (or may not even see) themselves—is one of the unique contributions of a leader. At all levels, one of the most critical functions of managerial leadership is seeing the path ahead within the time frame of current accountabilities. That forward view enables the team/group to transition smoothly forward from completion of today's work to what must be started next. For front-line leaders this may be as simple as making sure tomorrow's assembly line will have the materials needed to be able to assemble products. For mid-level leaders it could be understanding how a new system implementation should be rolled out to keep work going with minimal disruption. For executive leaders, it involves understanding the macrosystems -- the national and global context -- within which their organizations must maintain competitive advantage. They actively engage the sociopolitical world so as to maintain conditions favorable to their continued advantage. They also

hold in mind several probabilistic future directions and set shorter-term targets that move the organization in directions that keep as many possible positive directions open as they continue to gather and evaluate new information on the speed of technology developments, consumer tastes, geopolitical realities, or macro-economic trends.

A final key theme is the leader's capacity to build relationships of mutual trust. Organizations bring disparate groups together to achieve something that cannot be achieved independently. Trust is the lubricant that allows these different individuals and groups to work together toward a common goal. Effective leaders are willing and able to perform confidently within organizational structures in large part because they trust the motives and objectives of both the organization and their own senior leaders. Trust of, comfort with, and the ability to operate constructively and positively within authority structures is a key leadership enabler at all levels. As is the ability to build trusting relationships with peers and direct reports that help make things happen. These relationships of mutual trust must be earned and built around integrity of commitment to organizational purposes. Behaviors related to maintaining composure, positive work environments, and living by a moral code all contribute to building environments of mutual trust.

We believe the findings above can be helpful to organizations developing a pipeline of leaders across multiple levels and can help inform the development of curricula and other interventions to help improve the quality of leadership in their organizations. Some of the skills above can be developed if leaders have access to resources (training, coaches, other opportunities or exposure) and the personal determination to perfect their craft. Others are challenging for even the most motivated leader to develop if they do not have some of the fundamental enablers of those behaviors.

Effective leadership development systems use a combination of both individual and organizational selection and development strategies to curate a pipeline of leaders that enables current performance and future growth. It is an art, to be sure, but an art that can be grounded in more science than it traditionally has been.

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