

## How to Make the Most of Role Modelling

Written by Administrator

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There's an old saying that 'the example you set is the example you get'. Aristotle taught that "We learn by practice and the best practice is to follow a model of the virtuous person."

We know a role model is someone who serves as an example, whose behaviour is emulated by other people. A leadership role places many of us in the position of being role models, yet very little specific guidance is available on this subject. This article will look at the purpose, function and mechanics of role modelling in organisations and why this is so important in creating organisational culture. It also examines the whys and wherefores of the process of role modelling, what it is and what it isn't.

### **The role of the leader**

Role modelling provides the basis to set the climate of an organisation, to develop a culture and reflect its values and to pass on skills. It also encourages accountability for leadership to be distributed throughout the organisation. Inappropriate role modelling can lead to many problems. It is said that Richard Fuld, the former head of Lehman Brothers may have fuelled a gladiatorial atmosphere where it became almost impossible to challenge his direction and attitude to risk. At failed giant Enron, the examples set at the top led to individuals vying to be 'top dog' and score points over others, even if it meant in some cases lying or even fraud. Indeed, leaders must face the fact that they are role models each minute of every day and must accept the responsibility that goes with this.

Role modelling involves leading by example, adopting behaviour which is regular and consistent, being an example to others of what the organisation stands for and believes in. We are not talking here about distant larger-than-life or heroic characters - be it Churchill, Gandhi or Mandela -but rather day-to-day people to whom others can relate in their workplace. How leaders and managers behave is important in creating a sense of empowerment. Research indicates that the biggest influence on employee engagement is an individual's direct line manager.

There is plenty of scope to improve the quality of positive role modelling. A survey conducted among over 700 people confirmed that many employees do not feel that their managers are strong positive role models. In fact, only a third felt their managers to be good role models. (This survey was conducted in 2005 by Investors in People). A role model does not just have a place at the top of an organisation chart, they may be colleagues or immediate managers. The strength of a role model is likely to depend on valued job experience and knowledge of the organisation and strong communication skills, including listening and rapport building. One

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personal example is a line manager that one of the authors worked with as a young recruit in a consumer conglomerate. Their approachability and customer focus served as an inspiration for behaviour that has proved a lasting foundation throughout their career.

### **What is the value of role models to an organisation?**

Role modelling is a useful means to provide continuity and maintain high standards to be passed on to others. Role models perform three valuable functions:

- motivation, where you can identify to some extent with that person and feel motivated and inspired by them
- self-definition, where you say 'I'd like to have those characteristics, I'd like to be like that person'
- a source of positive habits, values and beliefs which represent the organisation to others inside and outside that organisation

Explicit role modelling forms a guide to one's own behaviour. If you personally consider the role models who have influenced you during your career to date, you will probably find that they are likely to have been your immediate line manager or supervisor, or a respected colleague. In this context role modelling is both informal as well as formal. It can take place via informal social networks, as well as within a more formal hierarchy and mentoring within the organisation.

Role modelling consists of much more than other people observing and copying the role model. A role model should not require someone to mirror every aspect of themselves, there is scope for individuality. However, it provides an opportunity to nurture specific behaviours. For example, to create a customer-centric organisation, generalities will not suffice; powerful role models help people to see how they personally should take time for the customer in lots of day-to-day ways. Customer friendly role models can be observed empathising with the customer, taking personal responsibility and going the extra mile.

What happens if there are many poor role models in the organisation? It is likely that conflicting

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and mediocre standards will prevail, with poor performance and disengaged people a potential result. This can frustrate leaders who fail to see the damage that inconsistent and misaligned behaviour can produce.

### What we expect of leaders

We have some clear views on leadership role modelling. Leaders who are good role models not only pay attention to their individual acts, they encourage teamwork and co-operation, support others in their growth and development, and recognise the positive behaviours and attitudes they display.

We are not advocating a fixed set of behaviours or slavish hero worship. On the contrary, a good role model will facilitate the kind of organisation where other people learn from each other and change over time. The CIPD has spelt out an HR role model in its role map as someone who “consistently leads by example. Acts with integrity and independence, applying sound personal judgement in all interactions”.

### An example of poor role modelling

One of the authors recently worked with a retailer that wished to improve its service to customers. It developed a set of values and behaviours to encourage customer-centricity, particularly promoting the concept of team working across the organisation. Employees were told that to deliver excellent service everyone had to work as a team. However, what they saw in the behaviour of their managers was back-biting and competitiveness. Senior managers' behaviour actively promoted a sense of rivalry and lack of cooperation.

### A successful example of peer role modelling

A head teacher in a primary school was always exhorting her colleagues to be innovative and bold. Yet at the same time as they were being urged to experiment, she rigidly enforced a detailed teaching style. The effect was demotivating and inconsistent. Fortunately, after two years of frustration on both sides, and following feedback from both staff and external advisers, the head began adopting a new more productive and consistent strategy which focused on peer role modelling. Instead of an unworkable top-down approach, a group of enthusiastic teachers in one area of the school were given the space to put into practice new ways of teaching writing. At last they felt in charge and enthusiastic. The head saw these examples of good practice and encouraged other people to find out what it was all about, how and why it worked and the benefits in their classrooms. This was much more successful than the previous strategy.

### Skills Role Modelling

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Role modelling can be valuable in developing identified skills. An important component of role modeling is to coach the other person and give feedback. A straightforward process for doing this might be:

**MODEL** the skill

**BREAK DOWN THE SKILL AREAS** into small steps, the other person acquiring one part of the skill before moving onto the next

**COACH** to assist diagnosis and evaluation, providing feedback

**RECOGNISE** achievements

**WITHDRAW** once skill levels improve.

L & D professions know that role modelling and coaching will only work if you allow people time to practise the behaviours and give them feedback to improve. You should also create a climate where it is OK to experiment. Of course, be open to two-way learning, too –there may be new, better ways of doing things.

### Seven Points For Successful Role Modelling

- **Self-reflection.** Self-reflection is the first stage: what is it that you are modelling? How sound is it? Consider public behaviour but also behaviour outside the public gaze. Assess the current impact that role modelling is having.

- **Develop a clear view.** What sort of role model is right for the individual, organisation and external contacts? There is no single template of a role model applicable to all organisations.

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- **Discuss and agree.** If you want to foster a certain climate in your organisation, discuss and agree the place of role modelling to promote defined skills, attitudes and behaviours.
  
- **Variety of role models.** Look out for the variety of role models that exist and take account that they exist at all levels, not just at a managerial one. Consider diversity: if role modelling is at least in part about identifying with individuals, not everyone in a diverse workforce will identify with a white, middle-aged male manager.
  
- **Communicate expectations.** Communicate with others what standards you expect, ensuring you consistently apply those standards. For example, praise behaviours you want to encourage, notice how consistent you are.
  
- **Walk the talk.** Be mindful of how you represent your team to others; be consistent and talk positively about your team.
  
- **People skills.** Be aware of and seek to develop people skills so that leaders are best able to use the opportunities for role modelling to coach, nurture and motivate others.

### Role Model Action Plan

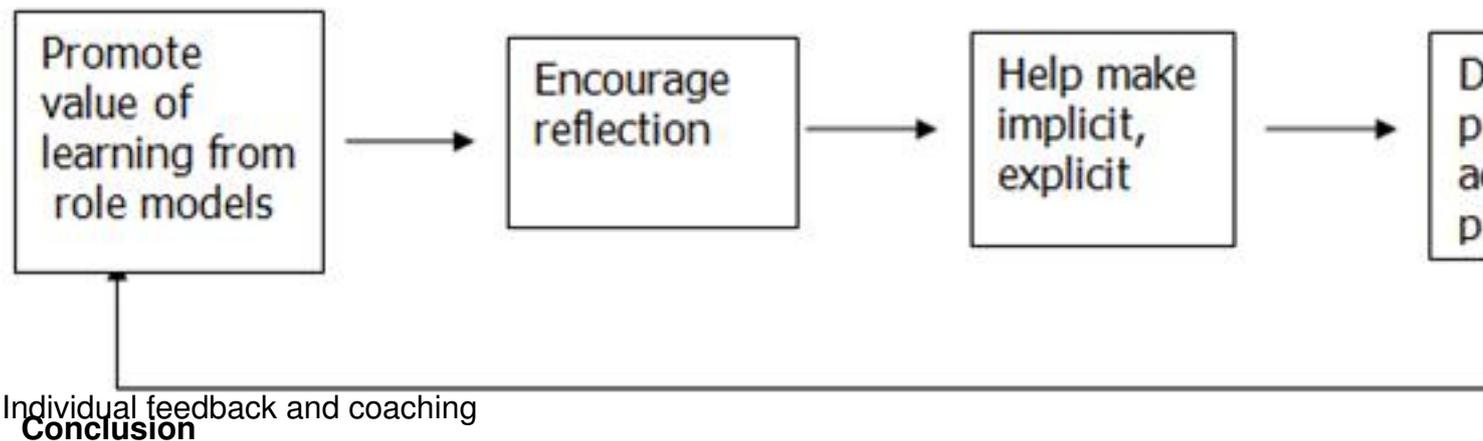
Here is a straightforward organisational action plan to develop leadership role modelling, facilitated by L & D. It starts with an organisational debate on the importance and value of role modelling to your organisation. This should encourage reflection, bringing a previously implicit process out into the open and leading to action plans. In putting the plans into practice, we expect much of the action will take place through individual feedback and coaching. A communication process will lead to further iterations, helping role modelling to take root.

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Role modelling is a part and parcel of the way organisations function, yet it is often implicit and unrecognised. Learning and development professionals should encourage leaders to recognise and develop themselves as role models in order to encourage behaviours which lead to a more effective organisation. By promoting greater insights into role modelling, an important part of organisational life will be brought into the open and given scope for further development.

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