

How to become a good role model

Written by Sarah Cook

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Role modelling is an intrinsic part of organisational culture; for excellent organisations to succeed they need strong and positive role models. Yet role modelling is often an implicit and unrecognised activity. In this article the authors look at the importance of role modelling and provide some pointers for successful role modelling.

The influence of role models

Think back in your life to those people who have influenced you most: it could be a boss, a colleague, a family member. Now think of the behaviours that these people displayed and consider the degree to which they role modelled actions and values which are now important to you at work and in life generally.

Role modelling is part and parcel of the way that work and society operates. We subconsciously seek to emulate our leaders, peers and those we look up to in life. Sports people are a great example of this: both in a positive and negative way. Many Olympian gold medallists are shining models of the art of the possible, whereas there are exceptions in the sports world. People who role model a glitzy life with poor moral standards.

At an organisational level positive role modelling can encourage behaviours which lead to a more effective organisation. When one of the authors was working with a business on a culture change programme, for example, leaders who interfaced empathetically directly with customers sent a positive message about the new behaviours the organisation wished to promote.

To create a customer-centric organisation, powerful role models help people to see how they personally should take time for the customer in lots of day-to-day ways such as taking personal responsibility and going the extra mile. For example consider how much time you spend directly interfacing with customers? Seeking and acting on customer feedback? Putting the customer on internal team meeting agendas?

What does it mean to be a role model?

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A role model is someone who serves as blueprint for others, whose behaviour is emulated by other people and who consistently leads by example. Yet role modelling consists of much more than other people observing and copying the behaviours of role models. Apart from the actions that role models promote, they also espouse an implicit set of values. Taking an example outside of the organisational perspective, the Queen is a role model of dedication and diplomacy.

Role modelling is a useful means to provide continuity and maintain high standards to be passed on to others. One of the reasons that people make good role models is alignment and consistency. What role models say and what they do is aligned and they continue to demonstrate the same positive values and behaviours on a consistent basis. When role models lose their credibility, it is often because their words and actions contradict each other (witness many people's disillusionment with politicians).

Do what I do, not what I say

Leaders throughout an organisation act as role models for organisational values and behaviours. One company developed a set of values and behaviours to encourage a customer-focused organisation, particularly promoting the concept of team working across the business. But these behaviours never took root because senior managers' behaviour actively promoted a sense of rivalry and lack of cooperation.

Make sure you are walking the talk. 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.

Be mindful of how you represent your team to others; be consistent and talk positively about your team. If you are part of the management team, toe the line: do not role model disunity by talking about team members behind their backs or questioning collective decision making. Such actions send negative messages to others.

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What does it take to be a role model?

This is all about being conscious of what you stand for, the behaviours you demonstrate and the impact these have on others.

- Self-reflection and self-awareness are important. Take a minute to consider what is important to you: achievement, team work, the customer, fairness?
- How well aligned is this to your organisation's values?
- What sort of role model is right for the organisation? There is no single template of a role model applicable to all organisations
- What behaviours is it important to role model?
- Next, think about what behaviour it is that you are currently modelling? How sound is this? How aligned is the behaviour with the values?
- Consider your public behaviour but also your behaviour outside the public gaze
- Assess the current impact that your role modelling is having – 360 degree feedback can be a useful tool here
- Develop a clear view of the behaviours you currently demonstrate. Discuss and agree the impact of these with your colleagues and team.

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- Identify what behaviours you project a positive role model for and others that may need adjusting or developing.

Role modelling and organisational culture

If you want to foster a certain climate in your organisation, consider the skills, attitudes and behaviours you need to demonstrate more or less of. For example, if empowerment is important in your organisation, to what extent are you fostering a climate where people are encouraged to make informed decisions? Do people refer to you for all decisions? What changes do you need to make to role model this quality?

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.

A good role model will facilitate the kind of organisation where other people learn from each other and change over time.

Promoting role models

Take time to spot and reinforce positive behaviour for others. 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.

Be explicit about the people in the organisation who are positive role models. Encourage them to mentor others in order to reinforce positive behaviours throughout the business.

Look out for the variety of role models that exist and take account that they exist at all levels, not just at a leadership or 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,

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middle-aged male manager.

Explicit role modelling can be thought-provoking for the role model, too. It can help develop a guide to one's own behaviour. Many organisations have created positive networks of diverse role models who act as mentors to others.

What are the characteristics of a great role model?

There is no blueprint for a great role model and people may have different role models throughout their working career. However, the strength of a role model is likely to depend on valued professional experience and knowledge of the organisation, coupled with strong communication skills, including listening and the ability to build rapport.

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