

CLEAR LEADERSHIP

Building interpersonal clarity for better outcomes

Clear Leadership is a framework and approach developed by Dr. Gervase Bushe to foster collaboration and partnership in organisations through improved self-awareness, communication, and interpersonal skills. This framework was developed to improve upon normal processes of sense-making which can generate 'interpersonal mush' and hinder collaboration.

Key Idea

Clear Leadership is based on the following core principles:

- People create their own reality and experience.
- Because everyone has their own 'story' about their experience and interactions with others, miscommunication and "interpersonal mush" can hinder collaboration.
- Self-awareness and clear communication are essential for effective leadership.
- Learning conversations are the building blocks of collaborative work systems.

The foundation of clear leadership is creating interpersonal clarity. This involves recognising that as a leader it is not actually your responsibility to make people happy or solve their problems – rather, it's your responsibility to get clear on their experience so you can work together to jointly solve problems.



How do we unpack experience?

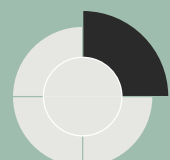
Clear Leadership identifies four key elements that make up our experience:

1. **Observations** – The sensory data we take in
2. **Thoughts** – Our interpretations, judgments, and beliefs
3. **Feelings** – Our emotional responses
4. **Wants** – Our needs, desires, and aspirations

Leaders must develop awareness of these elements in themselves and others to communicate clearly.

Acknowledgement

This explainer has been authored by MKI. We acknowledge the contributions of MKI Faculty member Professor Richard Hall and the seminal work on Clear Leadership by Gervase Bushe.



How to implement Clear Leadership

To implement Clear Leadership in your context:

1. Provide training on the core concepts and skills to others
2. Practice learning conversations regularly
3. Model Clear Leadership behaviours as a leader
4. Create opportunities for open dialogue and feedback
5. Reinforce Clear Leadership practices through coaching and performance management

Rationale

In politics, it is important to understand the distinction between (impersonal) transactions and (often personal) partnerships. Transactions are one-off or time-limited, but politics invariably involves a series of repeated games with repeating partners. In this context, the quality of your interactions is a critical ingredient in your ability to even have the conversations to explore whether win-win partnerships might be possible.

Politics throws up many situations where progress requires both parties to feel equally responsible for the success or quality of a common purpose, outcome or project. Clear leadership – replacing the mush for clarity – is the foundation of forging and sustaining partnerships that deliver.

How to practice Clear Leadership

Good leaders should not act as though their experience is the only one that matters. The experience cube is a very powerful tool for learning to understand other's experience, it is a framework for unpacking the elements of experience (OTFW) in our communications with others. It requires deep and active listening - to discern others' experience and to get closer to shared understanding.

01

Be more aware of your experience

Understand your own experience and reactions and accept that others have a different experience

- Speak in the first person (use "I") to make clear that you are talking about your own experience
- Understand that just as your experience is distinctive, this will also be the case for other people

02

Be more descriptive

Communicate your experience clearly and without judgement

- Describe every aspect of OTFW of your experience
- Making the distinction between what you observe, think, feel and want not only brings clarity to the person you are interacting with; it also helps to clarify your own position.
- Speak in the first person (use "I") to make clear that you are talking about your own experience
- Understand that just as your experience is distinctive, this will also be the case for other people

03

Be more curious

Genuinely inquire about other people's experience

- Focus on listening to everything and being present in the conversation, rather than listening for something specific that you might be expecting to hear
- Paraphrase regularly to clarify your own understanding, and to assure others that their experience is being genuinely heard and understood.

Ask cube questions

- What did you notice? What were you thinking? How did that make you feel? What do you want?

Refrain from offering advice, solutions, similar stories, accounts of your experiences, or your judgements until you get completely clear on their experience.

Additional resources

Bushe, G. (2012) 'How to practice Clear Leadership' [Video] (10 min watch) Gervase (pronounced Jervis) Bushe is the Professor of Leadership and Organization Development at the Beedie School of Business at Simon Fraser University in Canada. His career spans four decades of transforming organisational structures, cultures and processes away from command and control toward more collaborative work systems. In this short video Gervase Bushe sets out the fundamental concepts of clear leadership.

Three key strategies of Adaptive Leadership

02

Alternative between the Dance Floor and the Balcony

When you are in amongst the action, on the frontline, close to practice and attending to the detail in front of you, you get a very practical perspective of a problem. However, for adaptive problems, the context also matters. When in amongst the action, it can be almost impossible to form a balanced view of how the system is working.

To see the bigger picture, you will also need to step up onto the balcony. From here, you may see patterns and connections that help you identify win-win solutions. You can ask how and where power is being exercised, giving you a richer view of not only what is happening, but what may be driving it and what you may be able to do to influence it.

In alternating between the dance floor (in the problem) and the balcony (observing the problem), recall the late Canadian Minister Jim Flaherty's insight that on his desk at Budget time he needed both a microscope (to study the fine detail) and a telescope (to see the bigger picture). But trying to look through both at once produces only a blur. You need to alternate, in a cycle of zooming in and doing the work, and then zooming out again to see the context.

03

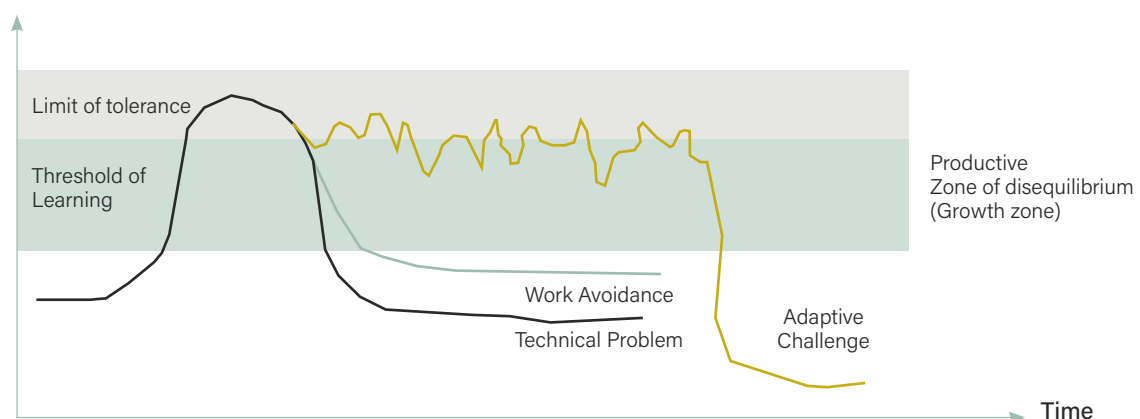
Regulate the temperature

Change often requires you to generate heat. You may have to hold difficult conversations, challenge norms, beliefs and values, share your frustrations and fears, and entertain trade-offs.

This is uncomfortable work that many people will avoid at all costs. They may push responsibility onto others, look for a 'big man' to step in and fix the problem, kill the messenger, externalise the enemy or create a scapegoat. They may divert attention from the real problem, deny or misrepresent it, redefine it to fit their competence, or reframe it to shift blame. They may send it off to a process going nowhere. Anything but doing the work.

Generating heat involves creating a sense of urgency and discomfort, even orchestrating conflict among people involved. However, there is a productive zone here – where the temperature is not too cold (avoiding the work) and not too hot (where the process overboils).

Disequilibrium



Some further resources on adaptive leadership

For Farayi Chipungu's APL 2024 workbook. Farayi's workbook, [click here](#).

Adaptive leadership has been built on a range of seminal publications by Ron Heifetz and colleagues, including [Leadership without Easy Answers \(1994\)](#) and [key extensions in 2001 \(with Donald Laurie\), 2002 \(with Marty Linsky\) and 2009 \(with Marty Linsky and Alex Grashow\)](#).

For an easy-to-read Public Admin Explainer from ANZSOG, [click here](#).