



CLEAR LEADERSHIP

Building interpersonal clarity for better outcomes

To partner and collaborate well we need to engage and communicate clearly. When we make assumptions about others or assume they are having the same experience as us, we create ‘interpersonal mush’ that hinders collaboration. Dr Gervase Busche’s Clear Leadership approach helps leaders to be more aware and more descriptive of their own experience and be more curious about others’ experiences. This supports leaders to better understand what is driving others’ behaviours, to avoid ‘interpersonal mush’ and support more effective collaboration.



Key Idea

Every person’s experience of the world and their interactions with others is different. Everyone has their own ‘story’ about their experience. We sometimes assume that everyone else is having the same experience as us and act as if our experience is the ‘truth’. This can lead to miscommunication and ‘interpersonal mush’ that can hinder collaboration.

Clear Leadership proposes that the key to sustaining healthy partnerships is ‘interpersonal clarity’, where:

- I am aware of my experience.
- I am aware of your experience.
- I understand the difference between them.

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.

The Experience Cube

The Experience Cube is a tool leaders can use to unpack and understand their own and others' experiences. It breaks down experiences into four key elements:

- **Observations:** The sensory data you perceive. This includes what you see, hear, and notice without adding interpretations.
- **Thoughts:** Interpretations, judgments and beliefs about the observations. These are your cognitive responses.
- **Feelings:** Emotional reactions to the thoughts and observations. This helps in understanding your emotional state.
- **Wants:** Needs, desires, and aspirations arising from the situation.



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The key to using the Experience Cube, or 'Walking the Cube', is practice. You need to be rigorous in holding yourself to account about which elements of your experience fall into which category, and in asking questions of others that encourage them to think in the same terms. This will initially start as a conscious effort and soon become a habit.

When to use clear leadership

In politics, it is important to understand the distinction between (impersonal) transactions and (often personal) partnerships. Transactions are one-off or time-limited, where partnerships are repeated games.

Politics invariably involves a series of repeated games with repeated partners where the quality of your interactions is critical to your ability to collaborate and explore win-win partnerships.

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



Applying Clear Leadership

Good leaders should not act as though their experience is the only one that matters. The Experience Cube is a powerful tool for unpacking the elements of our own experience (OTFW) and learning to understand other's experience. 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.
- Only use 'you' 'they' 'them' 'we' 'it' when it is absolutely clear to the other person that you are referring to a specific and known person, group or thing.
- AVOID attributing thoughts, feelings and wants to others unless it is an actual observation.
- Understand that just as your experience is distinctive, this will also be the case for other people.



Applying Clear Leadership (cont.)

02

Be more descriptive

Communicate your experience clearly and without judgement:

- This helps to both clarify your own position and bring clarity to the person you are interacting with .
- Describe every aspect of of you experience (OTFW), ensuring your experience is understandable to the other person.
- Be sure to describe your experience not your judgement of the other person.

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

Further readings on Clear Leadership

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.

Acknowledgement

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