LEADERSHIP AND DESIGN

ARE WE READY FOR A NEW RELATIONSHIP?

A Viewpoint Paper by Leeson Medhurst
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An opinion piece by

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When we commission, plan, design and build new workplaces, how much attention to do we pay to the style of leadership inside the organisation?

In the quest to enhance productivity, how much focus within the design briefing and development process do we place on what company leaders are trying to achieve?

Other influences on productivity were left trailing in the wake of leadership, which scored 53% of the entire sample compared with just 18% for environment in second place.

These questions are asked for two simple reasons. Firstly, there is now a picture of what can be broadly described as 'new-generation leadership' emerging in the corporate workplace, with new approaches to managing and motivating people. It can be argued that these leadership strategies should be more clearly foregrounded by workplace designers and current practice isn't doing that with sufficient rigour. Secondly, there is growing evidence that leaders make all the difference when it comes to raising organisational productivity – so workplace design needs to step up in support of the facts on the ground.
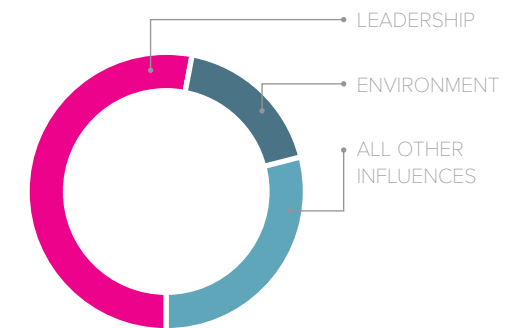
IMPACT ON PRODUCTIVITY

When my own consulting firm researched what enhances workplace productivity in 2018, in partnership with The United Workplace and WORKTECH Academy (1), the results of our international survey of 120 organ-

isations around the world were unequivocal: quality of leadership overwhelmingly impacts the level of productivity in companies compared to other factors.

Three other influences on productivity identified by our research team through a literature search (environment, technology and wellness) were left trailing in the wake of leadership, which scored 53 per cent of

the entire sample compared with just 18 per cent for environment in second place. Asked to describe their future plans to improve organisational performance, companies described a wide range of initiatives, but the largest set of future proposals were clustered around strategy and leadership. These plans included a focus on vision, agility, holistic leadership, mentoring, teamwork and changing the mentality of senior managers – clearly suggesting that the current dominance of leadership as the key factor in organisational performance is unlikely to shift in the near future.

Was there an opportunity for design to play a more significant role in integrating leadership initiatives into the workplace?

These results set us thinking. Was there an opportunity for design to play a more significant role in integrating leadership initiatives into the workplace? Could the relationship between design and leadership be re-set as a partnership in which workplace design becomes a canvas for new-generation leaders to express strategies that will entrust, enable and motivate people? And, as building culture lies at the heart of most workplace projects, could this two-way street act as a conduit for leaders to set the cultural tone?

Experts we spoke to for our first study certainly thought so. Commenting on the results, Dr Sally Augustin of Chicago-based Research Design Connections said: 'I'm not surprised that leadership trumps all else...But workplace design is nevertheless part of the package that influences how people think and behave. If the office is run-down, it suggests managers don't care.'

GETTING BENEATH THE SKIN

So, we decided to conduct a second piece of research with The United Workplace and WORKTECH Academy, delving more deeply into the relationship between leadership and design. This 2019 study had three components: first, a creative workshop for our own design team in which we created workplace concepts based on established and 'extreme' models of leadership; second, an international survey of 70 clients, probing their ideas and attitudes; and finally, a London round table of 15 workplace professionals to discuss and reflect on the results.

Each strand of the research built on the previous phase. Our objective was to really get under the skin of the subject to see how leadership style might act as a primary driver for workplace design and a creative lever for developing a new culture. We wanted to find out what design models and concepts might support a range of leadership styles and help to boost productivity. We knew issues of leader-led culture cropped up in many design briefs, but rarely with explicit emphasis.

CREATIVE WORKSHOP

We based our creative workshop on a new book called Heroes: Myth and Reality (2), co-authored by former US General Stanley McChrystal with Jeff Eggers and Jason Mangone. This examines 13 famous leaders in six pairings and one standalone account (the Confederate General Robert E Lee).

The pairs (a technique derived from the work of the Ancient Greek biographer and essayist Plutarch) include Walt Disney and Coco Chanel (termed 'The Founders'), Margaret Thatcher and William Magear Tweed, the Tammany Hall 'Boss' from 19th century US politics ('The Power Brokers') and Martin Luther and Dr Martin Luther King ('The Reformers').

Although the book gives historical accounts of leaders, it nevertheless provides a highly contemporary angle in describing leadership as a property of a system, and not simply the property of charismatic individuals. The system or environment in which leadership operates emerges as a key factor in how leaders perform – and we know the business environment has grown in speed and complexity over time.

We took five over-arching terms for different types of leaders from the book and transcribed them into an organisational content to set a different design brief for five creative teams in our half-day workshop. These leadership models were deliberately exaggerated to see what design concepts might emerge.
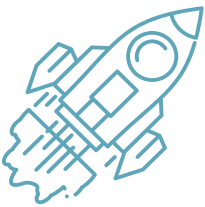
LEADERSHIP BY
EXAMPLE

The inspirational Organisation

Hero

The brief for this leadership model explored the ideas of leadership by example – or The Inspirational Organisation. Dyson was referenced as an example of a 'hero' organisation led by the singular entrepreneur and engineer James Dyson, who features personally in every company advertisement or pronouncement. The design team tackling this brief came up with the concept of 'Festival', with the slogan 'every day an away day'. Their design scenario imagined the office as a theatrical landscape with a kit of parts that allows for constant reconfiguration. There are different places to perform around the landscape, alongside smaller spaces to share, relax and think. At the centre of the space is a main stage for the 'hero' leader to address employees.
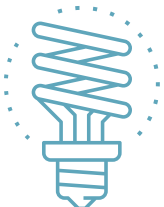
LEADERSHIP BY
MISSION

The Commitment Organisation

Zealot

The brief for this leadership model explored the idea of leadership by mission – or The Commitment Organisation. Google was referenced as an example of a 'zealot' organisation with its all-embracing Googler culture and mentality. The design team tackling this brief came up with the concept of 'Compound', with the slogan 'mission over the door'. This scenario presented the workplace as an entire mini-city with everything that you need on site – workspace, amenities, rest and relaxation – and no need to venture beyond the compound. The space is heavily branded, almost cultish, with an emphasis on total focus and discipline. The boundaries between indoor and outdoor space are deliberately blurred.
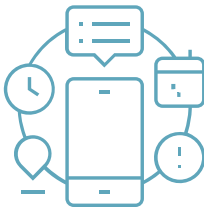
LEADERSHIP BY
INNOVATION
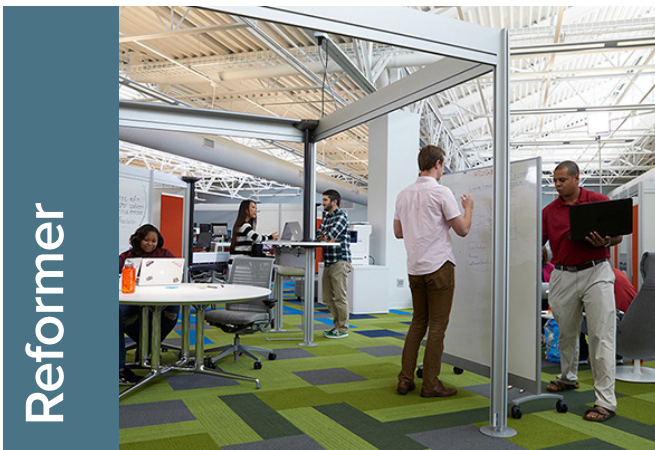
The entrepreneurial Organisation

Founder

The brief for this leadership model explored the idea of leadership by innovation – or The Entrepreneurial Organisation. Apple was referenced as an example of a 'founder' organisation living with the vital and powerful legacy of Steve Jobs. The design team tackling this brief came up with the concept of 'Living Lab', with the slogan 'irrational confidence'. This design scenario presented an innovation-rich environment dedicated to the 'art of the possible', with a mix of workshops, maker spaces and exhibition zones with access to samples, materials and prototypes. Messy, informal and non-hierarchical, this is a workplace focused on experimenting and 'failing fast to succeed sooner'.
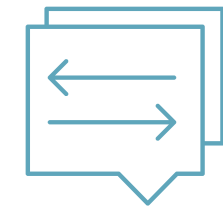
LEADERSHIP BY
DISRUPTION

## The Re-imagined Organisation

Reformer

The brief for this leadership model explored the idea of leadership by disruption – or The Re-imagined Organisation. Airbnb was referenced as an example of a 'reformer' organisation using digital technology to disrupt the hotel industry and applying its 'home form home' philosophy to its own workspaces. The design team came up with a 'Hyper-Agile' concept, using the slogan 'biomorphic dynamism' to describe a workplace that responds to disruptive leadership by creating a constantly evolving landscape in which a tech-enabled central hub is ringed with smaller satellite spaces where people can think and collaborate. Nothing is fixed. Flexible furniture and tools for remote collaboration support a ever-shifting work culture.

LEADERSHIP BY
NEGOTIATION

The Political Organisation
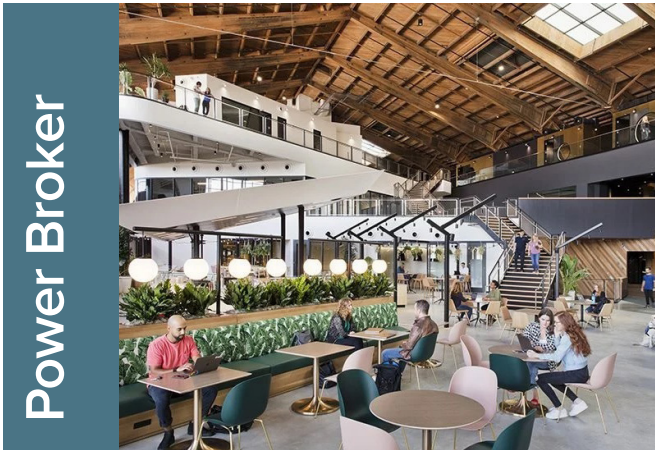
Power Broker

The brief for the final leadership model explored the idea of leadership by negotiation – or The Political Organisation. Zappos, the online shoe and clothing retailer based in Las Vegas, was referenced as an example of a 'power broker' organisation as it has empowered its own employers to design their own workspace by negotiation and even worked with the city to improve the local neighbourhood. The design team came up with a 'Consensus' concept based around the idea of the office as a mini United Nations. This has a big town hall at its heart, with a stepped plaza for all-company meetings, surrounded by spaces for negotiation at a range of scales. Social democratic settings reinforce an egalitarian, distributed leadership in which issues are discussed and deals thrashed out in green and consensual surroundings across every level of the organisation.
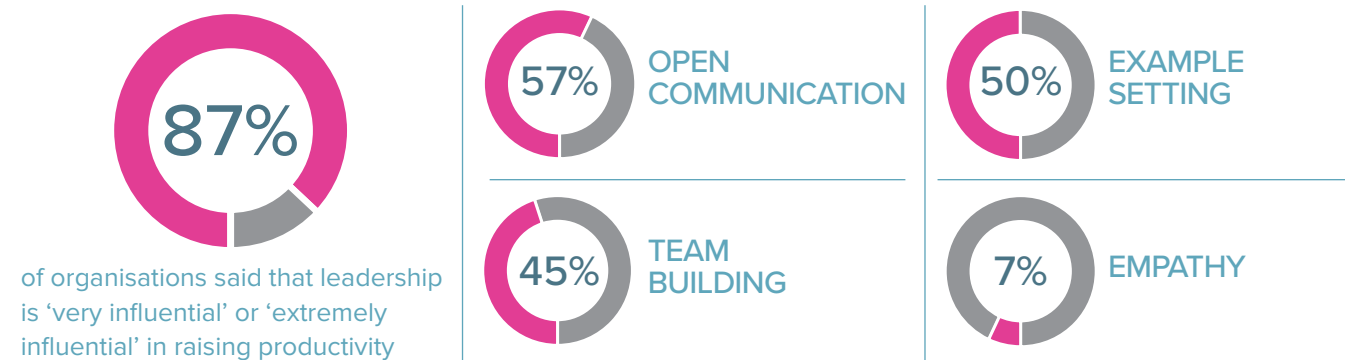
▶ Each design concept was expressed in a model using a range of materials and discussed by the teams involved in their creation. What emerged from the workshop was the speed and clarity with which different 'extreme' leadership styles could be given an immediate physical manifestation, with workplace design features supporting the main characteristics. However, it was recognised that few organisations are completely mono-cultural in terms of leadership and that different traits can be evident in one company.

CLIENT SURVEY

Armed with a range of workplace design features for different leadership styles, we then switched from the world of creative imagining to the practical front line of workplace implementation. We conducted a short survey of 70 client companies in the UK, Asia, Australia and the Middle East through The United Workplace network. We wanted to know what companies engaged in the workplace redesign process thought about the links to leadership and performance.

WHAT ARE THE MOST PRIZED QUALITIES LOOKED FOR IN COMPANY LEADERS?

87%
of organisations said that leadership is 'very influential' or 'extremely influential' in raising productivity

57% OPEN COMMUNICATION

45% TEAM BUILDING

50% EXAMPLE SETTING

7% EMPATHY

The results sent a clear message: 87 per cent of organisations in the survey said that leadership is 'very influential' or 'extremely influential' in raising productivity inside their companies, echoing our 2018 survey results. The qualities they prized most in company leaders were open communication (57 per cent of the survey), setting an example to others (50 per cent) and team building (45 percent). However only seven per cent of the sample opted for empathy - this rather went against the grain of those new-generation leadership concepts which elevate the idea of 'servant' or 'compassionate' leaders (3).

Two thirds of organisations in the survey had reviewed their workplace design in the past 12 months. Presented with the five leadership models that were explored in the creative workshop, a third of the companies identified with the Zealot model — leadership by mission — to describe their approach; and a quarter identified with the Hero model — leadership by charismatic example. Some companies suggested their leadership style combined different elements in a more hybrid format.

Nine out of ten organisations in the survey believed performance could be improved if leadership style was considered when redesigning the workplace, but only around half put considerable emphasis on leadership intentions when formulating a workplace design brief – and only one in ten make it the main focus of the project. If this can be described as a missed opportunity then clients clearly don't intend to repeat the experience: 85 per cent of companies in the survey intend a closer relationship between leadership strategy and the design of the workplace in the future.

The survey also solicited a range of answers on how to build the culture of an organisation and on which tools, technologies, spaces and settings can support an identified leadership approach or style. We were left with a clear snapshot of change in terms of company attitudes to the links between workplace design and leadership. It appeared possible to reset the relationship, giving designers new licence to roam creatively.

EXPERT ROUND TABLE

Our London roundtable of workplace professionals responded to the study and discussed the implications, giving a reality check to what we had explored. Some important points emerged from the debate, reflecting the complexity of a subject our research had perhaps tried to over-simplify.

The relationship between leadership and design was complicated by issues of culture and communication; leadership style was often confused with communication style, for example. The size of the organisation had an impact on perceptions of leadership; there was often a mismatch between the desired culture as declared by the organisation's leaders and the actual culture on the ground; and leaders changed frequently in all but the most successful companies and certainly more frequently than most offices are remodelled.

All of these factors make finding the perfect formula for aligning leadership and workplace design more closely difficult to achieve. However, what we learnt from our research was that there is now a real appetite to rethink the briefing and development process in creating new workplaces.

We may no longer cling to the 'org chart' (organisational chart) for direction, but most workplace design projects are still informed by data around headcounts, net usable space and departmental adjacencies, some generic stuff about vision and values, and maybe a

set of insights based on staff surveys, ethnographic or observational research. Companies always talk about wanting to set the culture but we don't probe in sufficient depth what next-generation leaders are planning to achieve in the space we are designing. That could now be coming onto the radar — and I would argue that it would a good thing if it did.

IMPACT ON PRODUCTIVITY

Ultimately, an exploratory research exercise of the type we have undertaken with our partners leaves us with more questions than answers. But it performs the valuable service of opening a conversation. My own take-outs are as follows:

The idea of the two-way street is essential. If the right leadership is not there, new ways of working don't happen; leaders must set an example in adopting new work practices. But equally, leaders need the right environment in which to set that example, which is

where design comes into the equation. Unless there is a partnership, leaders can't get to work on raising productivity.

The 'extreme' leadership models of Hero, Zealot, Power Broker and so on are very useful to provoke and engage designers, and create linkages, but a further level of analysis of employee needs is required to determine which groups of people can work well in different spaces or respond well to different stimuli and visual metaphors. There is also a requirement to probe company leaders more deeply as to their approach beyond the standard 'mission and values' capture.

This leads me to a third and final point. The real estate industry urgently needs to embrace co-design and other participatory design processes in the way other industries have done to really activate the links between leadership intent and workplace design. Cultural fit and communication style sit just beneath the surface and we must develop deeper and more meaningful ways to involve users in the design process.

We intend to add further layers to our investigation of the puzzle of productivity in the workplace in 2020. Let's continue the conversation.

Leeson Medhurst
DIRECTOR OF 360 WORKPLACE

Leeson will work with you to identify efficiencies in space and ways in which employee productivity can be increased.

Leeson will enter into a discovery phase looking at Building Functions, Staff Activities and Facilities. Undertaking a time in motion study and staff engagement programme will provide empirical data that helps inform decisions. Presenting you with facts and figures will enable us to make some very clear recommendations on space usage, productivity gains and changes to ways of working.

Sources: (1) The Puzzle of Productivity: what enhances workplace performance? (Fourfront Group and WORKTECH Academy 2018), (2) Heroes: Myth and Reality, Stanley McChrystal with Jeff Eggers and Jason Mangone (Portfolio Penguin 2018), (3) How We Work, Leah Weiss (Harper Collins 2018)

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THE UNITED WORKPLACE

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www.theunitedworkplace.com

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