

Micro-skills for collaborative leaders

Setting the tone for working well together

Leadership requires a complex skills-set. Historically, management has followed more of a command and control model. Many people get promoted to management by being good at their job. But without specific training, they often make it up as they go, tending to lead as they've been managed in the past.

We see certain micro-skills necessary for competent leadership.

By this we mean the people-skills required for high-level communication and collaboration. While many of them are required for good communication generally, we've focussed on these in the leadership context.

Self-awareness

It's most important to be conscious of what's happening for us. We need to manage with our inner space clear of fears and judgments. Yet by remaining conscious, we can often use our feelings about what is happening to check out with people how things are going.

We need to remain conscious at all times of our own feelings and reactions, keeping certain parts of ourselves under control. For example, the part that:

- wants to push things along
- to 'fix' the 'problem' or
- fears about what would happen if things got 'out of control'

Listening to understand

As leaders, we need to be able to deeply listen to people individually and in groups we work with to enable us to understand and honour their particular experience. This requires us to listen to the content and the key points being made, but also to listen to the feelings. These feelings may be expressed explicitly, or maybe implied through body language, gestures or small comments. We often call this heart listening, because we are not simply listening with our ears!

Validating

To validate is not to agree or disagree, but to deeply hear, reflect back and honour the fullness of what the person has said. We validate the content of what is expressed and feelings both spoken and unspoken. Validation is part of high quality heart listening. What we are saying with validation is, 'I hear you', 'I understand', 'It makes sense what you are saying', 'I can see it from your point of view'.

Normalising

It can be very powerful and helpful for people to have what they are feeling or experience affirmed as quite common, or 'normal'. Often people haven't realised that a lot of other people experience similar feelings. As leaders, it is very powerful for us to say, 'Yes that is quite a common experience', or 'That happens a lot'.

We must be careful with normalising that we do not take over the participant's story with our own story or that of another person.

Building on people's experience

We need to be able to honour the wisdom and experience people bring to the team. This means that when individuals or teams are facing challenges, you may need to ask them how they have handled similar situations well in the past. It is the role of the manager to hear and validate these experiences and synthesise individual wisdom with group wisdom.

Summarising and clarifying

Good clarifying and summarising by the leader is a very powerful skill in group meetings. It mirrors back to the group where they seem to be up to with the issue and helps make the next steps clearer. Identifying common themes that link and group what has been expressed, can help organise the team's ideas and help them develop their own solutions.

Noticing and naming

Often due to being absorbed in their issues, people are not aware of all that is going on for them. It can be helpful to notice what you see and hear and feed it back without judgment:

- 'I notice that your hands are clasped very tightly'
- 'your foot is tapping ...'
- 'I've heard you say 'it's too hard' a few times today – what does that mean ...?'

This is another way of holding a mirror up to people to see for themselves what's going on and come to their own awareness or insights. And through these their own learning.

Wondering

Along with noticing and naming, our gentle questioning and wondering can be helpful. 'I noticed X Y & Z', 'I wonder if AB&C might be going on'. Wondering is more subtle than direct suggestion and leaves the individual or team free to wonder about it themselves and to pick it up or let it go. Wondering is also useful if we have a suggestion to make that we think may be helpful. Rather than giving that suggestion directly, we can wonder, 'I wonder what would happen if we tried X or Y?'

Sitting with hot spots

As leaders we will need to be confident to 'sit in the heat' with people dealing with a range of issues from chaos and confusion, through conflict, to strong feelings of anger or pain. Such hot spots can bring up a lot of issues for us as leaders, with our own inner voices interfering with our ability to respond wisely. We may feel fearful about things getting out of control. We may want to rush in and rescue the individual or the team, provide them with just the right solution to fix their problem. However, it is wisest for us to try to simply hold the space. This allows the expressions of strong feelings, for people to be heard, to validate them, and then to allow the person to move on from that space.

Naming 'ghosts'

Ghosts are unnamed events or feelings, and are important things we are not talking about. They usually remain ghosts because of fear about what will happen if we do name them. Ghosts can loom rather large and take up a lot of space in a group, making progress very difficult or even impossible. The first thing we need to do, is to manage our own fears about the ghosts and then gently have a go at noticing them, so that they may be named and cleared away.

'Poking around'

'Poking around' is the Groupwork Centre term for a combination of a number of our micro skills, naming, noticing, questioning, feeding back, reflecting, finding out more:

- *'What happened when ...?'*
- *'How did you feel ...?'*
- *'I noticed that ...'*
- *'I heard you say that ...'*

and even noticing things that are very subtle like:

- *'I get the feeling that this is uncomfortable for you to talk about'*
- *'What's that about?'*

Sometimes we know that something important is going on in a group which is not yet being named. By gently asking key questions, and 'poking around' we can help uncover feelings or issues important to the process.

Defining purpose

Any team session needs to begin with a clearly defined and owned purpose.

Responsibility for the group

It is important as leaders we don't set ourselves up as the 'ultimate expert' and 'controller' of the team. Checking your perceptions, 'wondering' about what is going on, or simply admitting you don't know what to do next, is helpful. It ensures the team shares responsibility for the process and outcomes.

A key trap for leaders is picking up total responsibility for getting through whatever the team is undertaking. The team can unconsciously hand this over to the leader. If we unconsciously pick it up, we have placed ourselves in a 'parent' role and will behave as such. Correspondingly, the team drops into 'child'.

Participation in decisions

We need to be aware of everyone who has wisdom to contribute to a decision. We need to watch and check that people who want to or need to contribute get a chance, while not 'forcing' everyone to contribute. We need to be able to get the wisdom of all. Thus we can pool and link wisdom to build better outcomes.

Pacing

Keeping teams on track

Noticing and pointing out when they seem to go off on a tangent in meetings. Checking out with the team – does this feel off track or is this an important side track we consciously want to explore? Are we managing the time well?

Pacing energy in meetings

This means watching and feeling the group energy and checking this out with the group. Are we getting too tired to keep going? Do we need a break here?

Helping People Hear Each Other

We can never overestimate the power of getting people to listen with their heart, not just their head. To listen until there is understanding (not necessarily agreement) is the key to much of the 'magic' of great and wise outcomes in teams.

Helpful questions

A helpful question is one that draws out and expands what the supervisee is talking about, feeling about and thinking about. When talking about an event that went well for example, the supervisee may give a very short answer. 'It went well'. With helpful questioning we can expand that. We might ask:

- 'What exactly went well?'
- 'What aspect of it worked well?'
- 'What did you do that helped it to go well?'

These questions can expand the supervisees understanding of an event and appreciate more fully their own contribution to things going well and, when necessary understand their contribution to things not going so well.

Catching people 'doing good'

Given supervisees generally come to supervision with issues of concern or problems to be solved; focusing on what they are doing well is something we have to work at as supervisors. We have to become watchful to catch the good things they are doing, even amid problems they may be experiencing. Catching people 'doing good' also involves noticing and listening outside of supervision to other people's positive comments about the supervisee and passing them back to them in supervision.

Say More ...

This is an important micro-skill to assist people in developing their ideas and getting them heard by others. All too often in group discussions, people launch into a response to what someone else is saying before they have actually heard the full content of the idea. We are often anxious to jump in with our own thoughts or a counterargument to what we think is being said! It is the 'Yes, yes I hear what you're saying, but...' syndrome! Training ourselves to use the Say More micro-skill can lead to far clearer communication.

Stop

Sometimes, when conflict or other hot spots are happening in a group, we need to interrupt and stop the process. This must be done very wisely and without any tone of judgment, shame or blame. It is useful to 'cushion' the Stop with some other micro-skills such as Validation or Normalising. We might say, for example:

'Just let me stop you for a moment. I can see this is a very big issue and it's not surprising there are lots of strong feelings. Let's take a breath and have another go.'

Or:

'Hang on a second; there are a lot of people talking at once right now! I know this is a hot topic and everyone has strong opinions, so let's slow it all down a bit'

If there's strong conflict we may need to be quite strong (and maybe even loud!) with our 'Stop'. The stronger our Stop needs to be the more cushioning required so that it doesn't have a 'put down' edge to it.