

The Hidden Dimension of Leadership

Dr Charles du Toit



I was recently chatting with an HR colleague about the extensive use of psychometric assessments in leadership selection and development. Despite the sophistication of many of these tools, we both reflected on a familiar organisational experience.

People are promoted into increasingly senior leadership roles, appear to have all the right credentials, perform well initially, and then simply plateau. In some cases, they begin to struggle. In others they never quite make the transition from managing today's business to leading for tomorrow.

There are many possible explanations. Imposter syndrome, inadequate support, poor onboarding, insufficient coaching or organisational culture can all contribute.

The conversation reminded me of an experience many years ago, that fundamentally changed my thinking about leadership.

Our sales division was producing reasonable results, yet something wasn't working. We had capable, hardworking managers who knew their customers, built strong relationships and consistently delivered operational performance.

What they seemed unable to do was translate strategic direction into sustained execution.

Senior management invested considerable effort developing long-term strategy, yet somewhere between the executive team and the sales force that strategic thinking became diluted. Day-to-day execution remained strong, but the longer-term thinking simply failed to cascade through the organisation.

To better understand the problem, we undertook a complexity capability assessment, based on the pioneering work of Elliott Jaques and the later contributions of Gillian Stamp.

The results were enlightening.

Our managers were not lacking intelligence, commitment or technical competence. They were operating successfully at the level of complexity required by their existing work. However, as a leadership group, *we lacked sufficient complexity capability to interpret, integrate and implement strategy over longer time* horizons.

For me, it was one of those moments when everything suddenly made sense.

Since then, I have regarded complexity capability as one of the most important, and perhaps most overlooked, dimensions of leadership selection.

Most leadership assessments focus on the individual. They help us understand personality, behavioural preferences, emotional intelligence, values and interpersonal style. All of these provide valuable insights.

Complexity capability asks an entirely different question.

Does this individual have the capability required by the complexity of the work?

That distinction matters enormously.

Leadership roles do not simply require more knowledge or greater experience as we move up the organisation. They require people to think over longer time horizons, integrate increasingly complex information, manage greater ambiguity and make sound judgments with less certainty.

When organisations promote people without understanding this hidden dimension, they take a significant risk.

The individual may possess outstanding technical expertise. They may have excellent interpersonal skills. They may even demonstrate all the behavioural characteristics normally associated with effective leadership.

Yet if the complexity of the role exceeds their current capability, they will inevitably experience increasing difficulty.

The consequences rarely affect only the individual.

- ❖ The quality of strategic decisions declines.
- ❖ Execution becomes inconsistent.
- ❖ The leadership team begins to lose alignment.
- ❖ Opportunities are missed because nobody is quite seeing the bigger picture.

The Peter Principle reminds us that people are often promoted to their level of incompetence. Complexity capability helps explain why this happens.

An equally important consequence is its effect on trust.

Our work in Trust-Based Leadership suggests that people willingly grant leaders the gift of influence when three conditions exist. They believe the leader is capable. They experience the leader as consistent. And they believe the leader genuinely has their best interests at heart.

Capability is therefore not simply a technical issue. It is one of the foundations upon which trust is built.

Followers instinctively recognise when a leader is comfortable operating at the level demanded by the role. Equally, they recognise when decisions become hesitant, priorities constantly shift or complexity is repeatedly reduced to short-term operational issues.

Trust begins to erode long before anyone openly acknowledges the problem.

The reverse is equally damaging.

Highly capable people who report to leaders operating below their own level of complexity capability often become frustrated. They see possibilities that cannot be discussed, identify strategic opportunities that never receive attention and gradually disengage because they feel constrained rather than enabled.

Perhaps the greatest danger is that organisations unintentionally perpetuate the problem.

Leaders naturally appoint people whose thinking feels familiar. If a leadership layer lacks sufficient complexity capability, future appointments often reinforce exactly the same pattern. Over time, an entire leadership group becomes strategically constrained without anyone fully understanding why.

This is why I believe every organisation should pay far greater attention to complexity capability when making promotion and succession decisions.

Leadership development remains essential. Coaching matters. Technical competence matters. Personality and behavioural assessments all add significant value.

But none of these answers the fundamental question:

Can this person comfortably operate at the level of complexity required by this role?

If we fail to ask that question, we risk placing good people into positions where they are unlikely to succeed, not because they lack commitment or character, but because the demands of the work exceed their current capability.

Outstanding leadership is built when three elements come together.

- The complexity of the role.
- The capability of the individual.
- And the trust that naturally develops when people experience a leader who is both competent and genuinely committed to their success.

When those three align, leadership becomes something people willingly choose to follow.