Do you want to elevate your leadership? Leaders encounter a host of challenges on a regular basis. Developing a practice of empathy-based input in a creative environment equips leaders to face whatever leadership challenges come their way in fresh ways that make a difference in the lives of those they are designed to serve.

Webster defines empathy as “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another...” While the capacity for empathy plays a clear role in interpersonal interactions and relationships between individuals, it also plays a critical role in creative leadership that is informed by the perspectives and experiences of those whom a particular solution or initiative might impact.

The nexus between creativity and empathy is a close one. Researchers and practitioners have described creative leadership as that which requires thinking outside the traditional four corners of traditional problem-solving. This type of courageous, creative leadership contemplates new and innovative solutions to seemingly intractable problems. The presence of empathy in this process relies on humility in leadership, sets aside preconceived views, and honors the lived experience of “the other.” This intersection of empathy and creativity provides the impetus in which innovative problem-solving can occur.

A bias towards creative problem-solving requires that leaders and their teams approach the challenge at hand with a willingness to set aside easy answers and traditional means of identifying quick solutions. This is particularly true when the issue at hand is systemic, high stakes, or has significant potential to impact the lives of children, families, and/or educators writ large. To deepen awareness, understanding, and sense of the possibilities at hand, the leader is called on to lean into empathy in strategic ways.
The Ladder of Creative Leadership

The Ladder of Creative Leadership illustrates modes of problem-solving that increasingly rely on empathy and creativity as one moves up the ladder. At the bottom-most rungs is problem-solving that is done by an individual or small group in traditionally hierarchical positions of power. As one climbs the ladder of creative leadership, problem-solving increases in complexity and becomes more grounded in empathy.

The processes and systems reflected at the higher rungs of the ladder are grounded in increasingly complex, empathy-based problem-solving. It is useful to note that not every decision that a leader makes resides at these highest rungs of the ladder. For example, a leader who has a safety issue such as a fire hazard, brought to his or her attention needs to rapidly respond in a definitive manner. While the leader may be well-advised to seek more creative, empathy-based input for longer term solutions later, a quick and decisive response in the moment is needed (a decision that resides at the lower rung of the ladder).

However, the type of leadership that is reflected at the topmost rungs of the ladder involves skill that every creative leader should have in their professional toolbox. While they will not be appropriate for every decision, they are essential skills to be deployed when facing complex challenges that have broad impact. These types of skills, characterized by leadership tasks such as brainstorming, empathy-interviews, and prototyping, for example, are more likely to produce systemic solutions grounded in the lived context of those that the decisions impact and are crafted in a space of creativity. The ladder of creative leadership can be a tool for individual or group reflection which invites leaders to be nimble in the leadership skills and habits of mind that are brought to bear in the context of a specific decisions or problem solving processes.

This “ladder” illustrates increasingly inclusive, creative models of decision-making. The skills necessary at the top rung of the ladder which hover around design processes grounded in empathy, creative problem-solving, and group processes can be employed strategically at other rungs of the ladder as well, albeit in more isolated forms.

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**RUNG 5: EMPATHIC DESIGN**
Empathic decision-making relies on creativity and is deeply grounded in empathy, and humble inquiry into the perspectives of those that a decision will impact. Decision-making may include:
- Empathy-based inquiry
- Creativity and creative processes
- Tasks such as empathy interviews, analysis, brainstorming, prototyping, analysis, and tinkering/adjustment

**RUNG 4: TARGETED GROUP DECISION-MAKING**
This type of decision-making involves the delegation of a specific decision to a sub-group. It can include recommendations, delegation of decision-making authority, or processes in which a group votes on a particular aspect of a proposed solution. It may include creative, inquiry-based processes, and they tend to be isolated to specific aspects of the solution at hand. This type of decision-making may include:
- Delegation of specific aspects of a broader solution of strategy
- Design and implementation of creative tasks that are targeted and finite
- Decision-making here may take the form of a vote on a decision in which the majority rules

**RUNG 3: INFORMED DECISION-MAKING**
A small group, traditionally individuals or a group in positions of power, provide input or make a recommendation.
- Recommendations are made by individuals or groups
- Individual members may represent other constituencies and may seek their input prior to making a recommendation
- Members may employ creative processes to gather the perspectives of others

**RUNG 2: POST-DESIGN INPUT**
A leader or small group shares a solution after it has been identified to seek reaction.
- Leaders or small decision-making groups identify solutions
- Draft solutions are shared with broader groups for reaction and input
- Decisions may be tweaked, revised, or abandoned based upon the feedback

**RUNG 1: TRADITIONAL DECISION-MAKING**
A leader makes a decision or designs a solution with no, or very limited, input from others.
- The leader or designated leadership group is the decision-making body
- While the leader often incorporates his or her knowledge of the impact on others, input is not sought prior to decision-making
- There is limited creativity in the decision-making process
Iterating at the Top Rung

In this rung, many creative strategies are utilized such as:

- Brainstorming,
- Inquiry cycles,
- Prototyping,
- Empathy interviews

Irrespective of the strategy employed, formal and informal strategies are employed that honor the voices, stories, and perspectives of diverse individuals, particularly those whom a particular decision will impact whose voices may not be traditionally present in decision-making.

Decision-Making at the Bottom Rung

Conversely, at the bottom rung of the ladder is decision-making that is routine and “traditional” in terms of historic notions around leadership and decision-making. Decisions made at this end of the ladder may be pro forma. These are decisions typically made by an individual or small group in hierarchical roles. While this can seem a narrower model of decision-making, there are times when it is appropriate. For example, this type of decision-making may be appropriate for routine decisions or decisions grounded in law, ethics, or safety that require quick and definitive action. Other examples include compliance, health, and human resource decisions, the considerations for which are proscribed by law, ethics, or adopted policy. It is worthwhile to note that while routine decisions can come from this space, the application of these principles can also be deepened and enriched by some subsequent planning and input incorporating higher levels of empathy and engagement.

**Reflection Questions**

- As you review the ladder, on which rung do you see most of the decision-making occur in your organization?
- How can you practice the skills reflected at the higher rungs of the ladder with your team?
- While there are times for decision-making at each rung of the ladder, problems arise when there is a mismatch between the type of problem or decision at hand and the type of process that is employed to solve it. How can you ensure that teams begin a problem-solving process by identifying the most appropriate model of decision-making?

**Want to Learn More?**

As you build your mastery of empathy and creativity in your leadership practice, the following resources provide some opportunities to dig into some of the concepts presented here in greater depth.


Waddell, Gary. The Art of Everything: Leading for We in the Age of Me. 2020.


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