

MODULE 5

PRACTICAL LEADERSHIP

Segment	Content
Target time	35 minutes (video and reading – 22 minutes; questions - 13 minutes)
Introduction	<p>We have spent quite a bit of time talking about leadership theories and hopefully through the last three modules you’ve managed to learn a bit about 3 different approaches to leadership, and you have had a chance to reflect on how these might apply to you in your work situation, and you are starting to see your leadership in a new light.</p> <p>Since this program is about developing and enhancing leadership skills within you, let’s turn to some more practical leadership tools that will help you to see what you do on a day-to-day basis from a different perspective. Specifically, we will be looking at leadership levels of focus, that is strategic, operational and tactical; plus leadership decision making, both how it is structured and the level at which it occurs.</p>
Learning and development objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ At the end of Module 5, you will be able to describe three levels of leadership focus, and the importance of a leader’s attention to each. ➤ In addition, you will be able to describe the three steps of leadership decision making and the importance of a leader’s attention to each of the three.
Main text	<p>Today we are talking about practical leadership. And there are two areas I want to look at with you. First of all, it’s the levels of leadership focus. As a leader, we need to think about what we do, and what our team does, on three different levels. The three levels are ‘Tactical,’ ‘Operational,’ and ‘Strategic.’</p> <p>In simple terms, the tactical level refers to anything that is about the ‘current battle’, as we would say in the military. It is about today’s immediate issues as they affect you and your team. They are immediate, close to home and the implications of the issue don’t go beyond your area of influence. This is the level that most managers and leaders spend most of their time focussed on. The excitement and immediacy of ‘fighting fires’ keeps most leaders at this level whereas they should be spending their time equally on higher level, longer term, bigger pay-off, issues. The next level is the operational. The precise definition of this will vary somewhat according to the organisation, but it broadly relates to everyone and everything that is engaged in the same general endeavour. This might be the whole company in a small or medium sized business, or it might be a division or business unit in a larger business. Two business units in a conglomerate that were operationally connected, say one manufactures car parts and the other assembles them into major assemblies</p>

ready for fitting to the car will be operationally connected, whereas if the second business unit imported bananas it definitely would not! Finally, the strategic view is the broad perspective that reaches beyond the business unit and out beyond that. Strategic issues are broad, long term and pretty fundamental and can stretch from what competitors are doing, to the demographics of your market, to government legislation, to the changing activity of your customer groups.

Here is an example to illustrate the levels of leadership focus and how the ramifications of a decision can be felt at different levels. In other words, a tactical decision can potentially have strategic implications.

Imagine that a team, within a larger company, decided as a group that they preferred to begin their work day at 7:30am. Everyone on the team was in agreement, and happy to embrace the change as this would allow them to end their workday earlier. This decision is an example of a ‘tactical’ level decision - it affects just the day to day operation of the team. Or does it?

On the first day of their new schedule, the team begins to hear complaints from other teams within the company. Those teams are griping because the other team is leaving too early, and the other teams which interact with this team, do not have the access to them which they need. At this point, the team leader must look at their decision from an ‘operational’ level. Is the team’s decision to begin with an earlier workday having a negative impact on other teams and the business as a whole?

As the week progresses, the team leader begins to hear complaints from customers of the company, who begin to complain that they cannot reach the team during regular office hours. The team leader is forced to look at the change in the team’s work schedule and how it affects not just the team, or the business, but beyond their corporate walls, out into the wider world. This level of focus is the ‘strategic’ level and in this example a tactical decision has begun to have an effect on a group that could have a strategic impact on the business as whole.

My goal in having you look at these levels of focus is to help you, as leaders, not to make a similar mistake by having a limited focus. Great leaders make decisions based on an analysis of all three levels and the resulting impact their decisions have at each level.

Three Levels of Leadership Focus

Here is a diagram which shows the relationship between the three levels of leadership focus.

- ▶ Tactical
- ▶ Operational
- ▶ Strategic



Tactical Focus Level

The tactical level is the everyday level. It's the battles we fight again and again, it's the fires we put out day to day. And if you are a manager, this is very much the way you live and work all of the time. Your focus and energy is limited because you are consumed with fighting the tactical battles of the day, and it can be all-consuming. Your focus can become confined to thinking only about how to resolve the day to day problems, and complete the day-to-day projects, assigned to your team. The focus is only on the team's functioning within itself and on its dynamics. The leader's response to a tactical level issue should be, as far as possible, to let a manager handle the immediate firefighting, and to step back a little and ask "How will this decision or issue impact my team as a whole and our ability to deliver on our task?"

Operational Focus Level

As a leader, while you will be called upon to make tactical decisions and to take a lead in the 'tactical battle', you also need to start thinking at a higher level to provide real leadership to your team in a way that maximises its effectiveness. This next level is the 'operational' level. The amount of time you spend on operational level leadership decisions, to some degree, will vary depending on the size of your business. But let's just say you work in a medium size business. The operational level is not just your team or division; it's the entire business or company when viewed as one large unit. Its how your team relates to, interacts with, and impacts the entire business entity. You are thinking and focusing on how your decisions relate on a higher, bigger level, to the overall current and future success of the business as a whole. Your contribution to the bigger corporate picture. The leader's focus is, "How will this decision or project impact our company?"

Strategic Focus Level

The third level, beyond the tactical and the operational level, is when the leader begins to focus their leadership attention from a 'world view' or wider external perspective. The strategic level of leadership focus is the really big picture. The picture beyond just your company or business. It is when a leader starts to think about what's going on in the environment

outside, and in the market. It is when leaders start to think about the political, economic, social, technological, environmental and legal (PESTEL) issues surrounding the business and its place in the global marketplace and the world. The leader’s focus is, “How does this decision or project impact on the marketplace and the environment in which we, as a business, operate?”

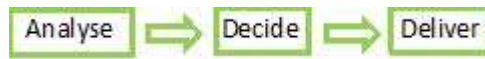
Truly superb leaders have the skill and ability to shift their focus back and forth between these levels to make a decision which is appropriate and effective at all three levels. On those occasions when a decision cannot be reached which benefits the team, and the business, and the wider environment, at least the leader has analysed the project or decision after assessing all three levels and can articulate the rationale behind the direction which has been taken and the impacts it will have. Considering projects and decision making using this three level approach will have a positive effect on you, your team, your company, and the world at large which will be felt not just in the short term, but in the longer term as well.

So, we do in fact need to understand the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of leadership focus if we are to be effective leaders, at whatever formal grade we are employed. In the illustration provided earlier, if the leader had analysed the issue of allowing or not allowing the team to alter its work hours from both an operational level and a strategic level of focus, it would have been clear, that the scheduling change was not going to work or at the very least mitigating measures should have been put in place. Unfortunately, the leader focused only on the desires of the team in isolation, thereby making a poor decision, which had negative ramifications on the team, the business, and the customers in the marketplace.

Broadening your focus is essential, if you are in a lower-level or mid-level position and have a desire to advance within your company, or if you have aspirations to lead your own company. While your expanded focus may not make a huge difference immediately, over time, you will see dramatic results as the quality of your decision making improves. Indeed, it is this sort of higher-level, broader thinking that starts to differentiate you from a manager and identifies you as a leader. As a leader, whatever the size of your business and whatever your grade, you should be thinking about the strategic level issues and how they impact on your business, and how you are going to convert this big picture focus to the tactical level.

Three Steps of Leadership Decision Making

Now, that you have looked at a leader’s three levels of focus, you are ready to look at the other key area of practical leadership. This is what leaders ‘do’ when making a decision. I’ve split that up into three distinct areas. It is ‘analysing,’ ‘deciding’ and ‘delivering’ (which can also be called, ‘acting’ if you like.)



Analyse

Clearly, a leader must spend time analysing. Analysing is the process of taking a task or a decision and breaking it down into parts. The leader thinks through the type of plan which will need to be put in place to make the task or project a reality. The leader also determines the ramifications, good and bad of implementing and carrying out the project or task. Gut instinct is great, and I am a great believer in acting on gut instinct. However, that gut decision has to be prepared for by some thought and data gathering! There is therefore a case for analysis in pretty much all decision making; that is the type which causes the leader to engage in critical and creative thinking. That being said, you don’t want to analyse too much. We don’t want paralysis by analysis which is a surprisingly common condition.

Decide

Once the analysis is done, a decision must be taken. That decision needs to be a clear, considered, definite, timely decision. This can be very difficult and at times painful. Some people avoid making decisions to save hurting people or in fear of making the wrong decision. However, the consequences of not making a decision are often greater. In the military, we are taught the importance of timely decision making and that a ‘poor decision followed through decisively is likely to be better than no decision’. One of the things that often surprises me is how two extremes of decision making are common and both be equally flawed. First there is the ‘decision by committee’ in which a leader abdicates responsibility for a decision and allows the majority to decide. This might be appropriate or required in certain circumstances, say with a board of directors or trustees. However, for many leaders it is simply a sign of weakness. Alternatively, the lonely leader who retreats to their office to make the hard decision on their own can be missing out on a fantastic opportunity to grow their subordinates and engage them in the running of the business. Asking for input and advice from your key team, even asking for a majority view, is a powerful way of bringing the team together whilst always retaining control of the process and a clear acknowledgement that you as leader have the final say or veto.

	<p>Deliver/Acting</p> <p>Finally, when all is said and done, you’ve got to announce the decision you’ve reached, you’ve got to deliver the message, you’ve got to set the policy, and you’ve got to take action.</p> <p>So, remember back to the illustration at the beginning of this module and the leader who allowed the team to alter their work schedule? I would suggest that in the context of decision making, the leader’s downfall was in omitting spending any significant time analysing, before deciding and delivering/acting on the issue. As you begin reflecting on your leadership decision making, consider the following: Are you incorporating all three of the steps into your decision making? And when you are making decisions, are you looking at them from the tactical, operational, and strategic level?</p>
<p>Key point</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ A great leader focuses on three different levels: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Tactical - the impact of decisions on the team and the immediate business. ○ Operational - the impact of the decision on the wider organisation and the team’s place in the organisation. ○ Strategic - the impact of the team on the wider environment and the wider environment’s impact on the team. ▶ A great leader uses three steps in decision making: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Analyse ○ Decide ○ Deliver
<p>Task for the day</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The task for today is two-fold. ▶ First, think about your leadership focus. How much time do you spend focused on the tactical aspects of leadership and how much at the operational and strategic level? What sorts of issues affect you, and do you affect, which sit at the operational and the strategic levels? ▶ Second, reflect on your decision making as a leader. Using a total of 12 points assign a number from one to 12 for each of the three areas (analyse, decide, deliver) which reflects your typical decision making process split between ‘analyse,’ ‘decide’, and ‘deliver’. (When you add all three numbers your total should be 12.) Are your numbers close to being equal in each category (that is 3 fours)? Or are you spending more time focusing on one area, to the neglect of the others? What can you learn from this?
<p>Questions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ As you reflect on the tasks of the day, and the different levels of leadership focus, how would you assess your current thinking on leadership issues? To what extent is it tactical, operational or strategic? ▶ Thinking about your decision making, how would you assess your decision making process? In what way, might you want to change it now?

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ What additional skills, information or resources do you need to help you excel in those areas which you feel least comfortable?▶ What can you commit to doing in the next 24 hours to make an improvement in your leadership focus and decision making? |
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