

BUSTING FOUR MYTHS AROUND LEADERSHIP AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

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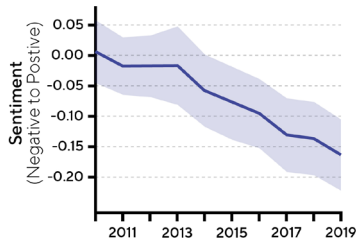
Leadership is becoming increasingly complex and multifaceted and has been the subject of extensive study and discussion throughout history. As society evolves and organizations adapt to ever-changing dynamics, so too do the expectations and myths surrounding leadership performance. In the realm of leadership, myths often emerge, perpetuating misconceptions about what it takes to be an effective leader. These myths can lead to misguided assumptions, hinder personal and professional growth, and even derail organizational success. To navigate the intricate landscape of leadership effectively, it is essential to dispel these myths and gain a more accurate understanding of what truly constitutes exceptional leadership performance. In this exploration, we will unravel some of the most pervasive myths that have clouded our perception of leaders and their abilities.

1. 'Only the paranoid survive'. Leaders need to continually focus on risks.
2. Leaders need to measure multiple key performance indicators.
3. Leaders must be strong and avoid showing vulnerability.
4. Teams can function well even if their members don't feel well or secure.

1. 'ONLY THE PARANOID SURVIVE'. LEADERS NEED TO CONTINUALLY FOCUS ON RISKS

We're addicted to bad news. An analysis of the nature of news over the last 20 years has shown that news is getting much more negative (see chart below). Making matters worse, we consume this news more. Rather than just reading the daily newspaper or watching the news at 10pm as we did decades ago, we now check the news constantly. All day, via news apps or social media. This affects us, and how we see the world.¹

Increasing negativity in news article headlines in 47 major news outlets



Source: Rozado et al. (2022): Longitudinal analysis of sentiment and emotions in news media headlines.

In the workplace, similar trends are at play. According to renowned psychologist Daniel Goleman, there’s a negativity bias to email – at the neural level.² In other words, if an email’s content is neutral, we assume the tone is negative. In face-to-face conversations, the subject matter and its emotional content are enhanced by tone of voice, facial expressions, and nonverbal cues. Not so with digital communication. And as our share of digital communication has increased, as well as the urgency of that communication, so has average negative sentiment in companies.

However, while it’s important to pay attention to the negative, it’s more important to not get too clouded by it. We work best when we’re positive. Indeed, if we look at how our brains’ function in a negative or positive emotional state, we see clear differences (see chart below).

The impact of work climate on cognitive abilities and performance

Work environmental climate	
Motivation by fear and competition	Motivation by positivity, feedback and care
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊖ Fewer ideas ⊖ Retreat, risk avoidance ⊖ Tunnel vision ⊖ Perceptual mistakes ⊖ Focus on self, survival 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊕ More insights ⊕ Open, more alternatives ⊕ Awareness ⊕ Fewer perceptual mistakes ⊕ Aware of others, the whole

So rather than allowing ourselves to get flooded with negativity and urgency, with its associated impact on how our brain functions, it's important to pay attention consciously to all that is going well. Positivity is a key component of Careformance, and a useful buttress to our increasingly negative perceptions of the world.

So, we'd rephrase this myth to: **leaders need to strike a balance. Appreciating the positive, while paying attention to risks. To do this, we work with teams and leaders for them to reflect on what has gone well regularly, to share their positive developments and take time to appreciate each other.**

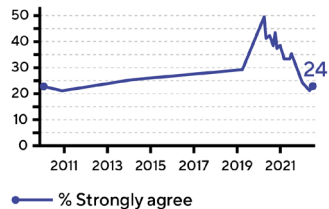
2. LEADERS NEED TO MEASURE MULTIPLE KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

There's a sense that businesses need to multiply projects, processes, and key performance indicators (KPIs) as they grow. For every new process, goal, or customer, they identify more KPIs, which are then measured in ever more complex dashboards. It's no surprise many companies are struggling with this complexity.

A measure of this is the 'complicatedness of internal processes and measurements' index (which aptly, is a rather convoluted title). A Boston Consulting Group (BCG) study in 2020 found that by this measure, organisational complicatedness has grown 35-fold since 1955.³ Importantly, on average, employees spend 40% to 80% of their time doing non-value adding activities such as reporting and meetings. And while measurement complexity has increased, the felt sense of employees feeling cared about by their employers has been declining again, after an improvement during the pandemic (see chart).

As business become more complex, employees feel less cared about

My organization cares about my overall wellbeing



Source: Adapted from Gallup US Workforce Study

We'd reformulate this myth to: **leaders need to balance focusing on a few core KPIs as well as the wellbeing of their staff, to ensure success. To do this we recommend that companies reduce their KPIs and that leaders include care measures, such as happiness, felt sense of work life balance and engagement to the key measures they track.**

3. LEADERS MUST BE STRONG AND AVOID SHOWING VULNERABILITY

This is such a common belief of leaders. That they have to be strong, heroic, and can't show weakness. Liane encounters this a lot in her executive coaching work. She sees leaders and managers that are exhausted and close to burnout. But they still believe they need to solve every problem personally. Liane recently worked with a senior leader in a technology company. This person was a candidate for the C Suite. And yet, they still believed they needed to be personally solve *every problem that their team encountered*. This 'responsible' way of thinking, while commendable, was also limiting.

A leader's goal should be creating the space and systems for their teams to solve problems independently of their input. This is the opposite of 'hero leader' syndrome. A state of mind where managers rely heavily on their high work output, productivity, and experience, and act alone to solve their team's problems. When in hero leader mode, team members won't grow, but a dependency culture will. Hero leaders aren't actually superhuman; they quickly become stressed. This in turn drives stress in their teams, triggering feelings of isolation and self-doubt in other team members. Businesses' output and emotional intelligence then suffers. Another sign of how careformance can't be ignored.

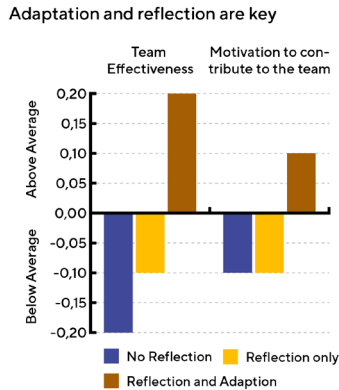
So, we'd reformulate this myth to: **leaders who attempt to be heroic don't allow others to grow and flourish. We suggest leaders admitting they don't always have the answers. Sharing vulnerabilities, so team members can step up and feel safer. And finally, delegating. It's better for all involved.**

4. TEAMS CAN FUNCTION WELL EVEN IF THEIR MEMBERS DO NOT FEEL WELL OR SECURE.

This focus on tasks while papering over inner discordance or ignoring how teams are interacting, is a common modus operandi of teams (even if they don't realise it). This makes teams feel effective and focused on getting stuff done – but blind to the realities of engagement, positive collaboration and innovation.

We've seen in our work with 110 teams that psychological safety has a 0.7 correlation with

team performance, an extremely high level.⁴ We've also seen that a willingness to address team emotions is one of the core contributors to building psychological safety. In addition, taking time to reflect on the team's habits and collaboration are one of the best predictors for a team remaining a learning team and growing. In fact, this pausing and reflecting as a team, as well as the willingness to address team emotions, can be great motivators for team members.



Source: Awaris TeamMind Data, Distribution of teams: no reflection = 30%, reflection only = 33% and reflection and adaption = 38%. Data is transformed for main outcomes.

So, we'd would reformulate this myth to: **Positive, reflective, and psychologically-safe teams are high performing teams. Teams definitely should pay attention to how they collaborate regularly reflecting on their habits, and anchoring habits of care and psychological safety.**

TIME FOR REFLECTION

Many of you will probably agree with these points, we hope. Perhaps, you'll have explicitly known them or unconsciously understood them for a while. But there's a big gap between what we know in moments of reflection, and what we do. **If this wasn't the case, then these performance myths wouldn't exist.** And this is the case especially when we get stressed. These myths essentially reflect how a stressed, mechanistic mind sees the world, and not how a human-centric, balanced person sees things. And so, we frequently fall back into this way of thinking when we get stressed, forgetting that care and performance are inextricably linked.

The next step towards living Careformance is also crucial; shifting our personal and team behaviours. This will be the focus of the next blog post.

Sources

1 Lisa Feldman-Barett (2023). **How a short negative news detox could revive your metabolism.** In: *BBC Science Focus*.

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3 Vinciane Beauchene & Molly Cunningham **The end of management as we know it.** In: *Boston Consulting Group*

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