

Four-Dimensional Leadership

The most Safety- and creatively-effective companies are “Leader-full,” with leadership functions distributed and filled by many people throughout the organization.

By [Robert Pater](#) | May 01, 2015

On which leadership planes do you work? Most of us think of living in a three-dimensional world (1. Length, 2. Width, and 3. Depth). But not only do the analytic xyz's of this apply to physical objects; they also coordinate well for Leadership--with a plus.

According to numerous early development studies, each of us learns about three-dimensional space as an infant. Visually perceiving this way is termed "depth perception" and is critical to building eye-hand coordination. Of course, we would miss a lot, be far less effective throughout life, and far less safe were we only able to see in two dimensions. Yet, in effect, many approach leading change as only operating in two dimensions. This mindset results in artificially flattening what's really going on, starting off with the perceived point of where a company is, then plotting a straight line to the goal we want the organizational performance to be. Regrettably, real life frequently intrudes, departing from this straight-line planning model. Despite some of our best hopes, most people don't think or react linearly and don't predominantly operate logically. Personal concerns/fears/aspirations, company politics, resistances to doing things even a little differently all intrude, often deflecting the best laid plans to then tangent off into the distance. That's one of the reasons people who "know better" still smoke, eat unhealthily, are out of condition, and engage in patently unsafe acts. In actuality, a curve or even an up and down line diagram (as in, four steps forward, three back) sometimes better describes the real, messy process of implementing change.

Linear/"flat" leaders don't seem to understand what Will Rogers wisely advised: "Planning gets you into things. Hard work gets you out of them." Such leaders tend

to initially set upon a path and then "stay the course," no matter how others react or whatever unexpected changes may occur. So most of their efforts are front-end loaded and then ignore what's really going on. It's like a martial artist who pre-plans and then continues with the same offense in every fight, no matter who the opponent is or how he responds. While it's possible to dominate very limited adversaries, this strategy falls flat against even mediocre fighters and laughably loses credibility with sophisticated resisters.

Contrast a two-dimensional approach with Four-Dimensional Leadership, which is best described as: "Applying the right amount of measured force, in the right place, in the right direction, at the right time." When skillfully interwoven, these four help determine a company's actual results and culture. By the way, "force" here doesn't at all only equate to "pressuring" or "pushing." For example, higher-level leaders understand the process and mechanics of applying "Secondary Pressure" (influencing others who in turn affect others) or "drawing"/magnetic-like attraction to spur positive momentum while dramatically dissolving resistance to change.

You might think of Four-Dimensional Leadership as balancing:

1. *Volume/amount:* Too *much* change at once overwhelms and can even shut people down. Too *little* focus on improvement--or piloting potentially better solutions--creates stasis and can lead to apathy or complacency, both at odds with highest-level Safety.
2. *Place/kind:* How much "Command and control?" And is this a "harsh"-seeming approach ("We don't trust you") or one that appears to be "benevolent" ("We will take care of your Safety because we care."). Even more effective, to what degree is the kind of leadership in the company externally participative or (best) internally determined?
3. *Direction:* From where does leadership stem--predominantly from the executive suite? Both top-down and grassroots-across? How much leadership springs from middle managers and front-line supervisors? The most Safety- and creatively-effective companies are "Leader-full," with leadership functions distributed and filled by many people throughout the organization.
4. *Timing:* Though often just given short shrift, timing is perhaps the most critical element in change. In fact, the best intervention put into place at the wrong time can actually backfire. It's amazing how much more likely an idea or approach will be embraced when people are even slightly more receptive, a little less disconnected or angry. Wise leaders like Anil Mathur (CEO of the Alaska Tanker Company, acknowledged as the safest and most environmentally responsible oil tanker company in the world) contend there are leadership approaches that are essential

for stepping up from lowest to minimally effective level of culture but are totally inappropriate--and will likely backfire--when applied to a culture that is mature and has attained a better-than-average culture. For example, to move from the lowest level of performance, where Safety is not really valued, leaders might have to be prepared to be much more autocratic ("If you don't agree with how important Safety is here or don't actively lead this, you'll have to leave."). But this is the antithesis of the inclusive, more consensual/elicit buy-in approach that is critical for moving from good to superior performance and culture.

When planning and implementing change, the wisest and most perceptive leaders employ enhanced organizational depth perception, and then coordinate their efforts along four dimensions.

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