

GALVANISING LEADERS

What's involved and what does it take?

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INTRODUCTION

Our clients are expressing the growing need for getting their leaders back together, to re-group and re-focus. It was reflected by those attending our recent *Galvanising Leaders* summit, themselves representing a wide range of UK and multi-national businesses (including AO, Bayer, BSI, Deloitte, EcoLab, Marks & Spencer, Morgan, NatWest, Nucleus, Orange, Scottish Power, Standard Life, Sykes and Yorkshire Water).

There we explored real and current challenges around the take-up of leadership responsibility. Senior executives described leaders as facing the demands of increasingly complex, large-scale digital and structural transformations, and all this against a pandemic backdrop of increased concern for well-being and the acceleration of hybrid work patterns.

We asked what's getting in the way of leaders leading, and it seems the pandemic has:

1. reinforced some of the perennial obstacles (ambiguity, clarity of role and expectation, conflicting requirements, confidence, psychological safety and overwhelm) *and*
2. created some new challenges ('leading from home', disruption on a new scale and organisational ways of working that have suddenly become outdated).

One participant observed that, in order to galvanise leaders across the business, leaders in L&D themselves (including himself) would need galvanising, to become more agile and step out of their "...safe and familiar space".

The group as a whole had a growing sense that the ways to overcome these obstacles and get leaders leading lie beyond yet more re-definition of leadership capability and yet more development programmes.

That's not surprising. Organisations rarely ever show that their espoused leadership principles, competencies, behaviours etc. have ever become the norm for their people (CEOs are becoming dissatisfied with the answer that another new set is needed); and it's widely acknowledged among researchers that evidence of leadership development initiatives delivering organisational outcomes is poor.¹

At Ideas Unlimited, galvanising leaders has been at the heart of our practice for over 20 years. So at the Summit we shared (and share here below) some perspectives on the nature of this work. We start with aspects of the *personal change process* that goes on inside leaders (largely subconsciously) and the *lived experience of encouragement* they need. Then we share what that means doing in practice – some *galvanising interventions*.

As well as practical approaches, this describes our *philosophy* of galvanising leaders – what this work means and is trying to do: so we use some concepts and language from psychology and sociology here that we *wouldn't* use with participants in the work. If you'd like to explore what galvanising leadership is about and how to get leaders leading in *your* organisation, do get in touch.

PERSONAL CHANGE PROCESS

LEADERSHIP SOCIAL IDENTITY

Social identity theory² holds that our sense of who we are is at least as much informed by the groups or 'tribes' with which we identify as it is by anything else that's going on more consciously. That's important because we often ask people to be members of a leadership population which isn't the group they experience belonging to in day-to-day practice. E.g. do I see myself as responding to challenges as a leader of the Finance function or as a senior leader of the whole business with an enterprise-wide perspective? Whether and how I lead depends on my experience of which team of leaders I am demonstrably part of and the *distinctive* role that it has to play.

COERCION DRIVES SHORT-TERM COMPLIANCE AND LONG-TERM RESISTANCE

A lot of what we do in organisations is about trying to incentivise or otherwise coerce people to lead a particular thing (execute this strategy) or lead in a particular way (exhibit these behaviours). The amount of coercion and incentivising has a perverse effect: as long as 60 years ago researchers³ found that the more coercion there is, the more people appear to comply in the short term but the less they change their underlying beliefs, attitudes and behaviour in the long term!

WE ADJUST OUR SELF-IMAGE TO FIT OUR ACTIONS

At the same time, whilst we tend to work from the premise that our behaviours and actions follow our beliefs and attitudes, work on cognitive dissonance⁴ also shows that we actually adjust our beliefs and attitudes so they align with the actions we're taking. That means, rather than focusing so much on either attitudes, capability *or* behaviours, we can be better off working on getting people to step in to the *doing* of delivering the new strategy or leading in a different way, knowing that their beliefs and attitudes will shift to match that.

LIVED EXPERIENCE OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Added to those personal change processes going on unconsciously, it is vital that individuals are having an actual lived experience of being encouraged to lead something different or differently.

EXPERIENCE SUSTAINED TOP-DOWN WILL FOR CHANGE

Something that's key but often lost is the sustained prioritising of what you want me to lead over other issues. We all have a lot of experience of initiatives that get trampled, side-lined or truncated by other stuff that comes up. Intended or not, the message from above is clear – "...we've done that long enough now", we move on to something else and we never come back to it – ergo it never really mattered!

EXPERIENCE A SUSTAINED PROCESS OVER TIME (NOT JUST INCIDENTS AND MATERIALS)

And what goes with that sustained, top-down will for change is the need to sense a process of change happening over time. And that experienced, not only in the form of incidents (workshops, events etc.) and artefacts (tools, materials etc.), but also in more substantial ways that are in the work and part of life (structure, recognition etc.) Without the process feeling like it is built-in and has longevity, leaders won't feel safe to take the lead.

EXPERIENCE SUPPORT FOR EXPERIMENTS IN CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

And, talking of safety, what happens when I'm asked to challenge the status quo? How do my boss and her boss react when, if I'm asked to take more initiative, I actually do?! And what if, because I'm learning how to do this, it doesn't go well? My lived experience of the invitation and reaction is the most powerful message about whether it's safe to act. I need to feel like I'm being asked, not to get it right, but to find a way, through experimenting and prototyping.

GALVANISING INTERVENTIONS

When we take these aspects of personal change and lived experience together (and there's no other way of taking them because they're so intertwined), what do they mean for how we might intervene? Here are four examples from our practice at Ideas Unlimited.

CREATING TRIBES IN PRACTICE

If we're being told we're part of a leadership population, how does that become true? Experience suggests that it requires us to have a piece of work to do together – actually to be on a mission together that is distinct and differentiates us as a population – and to find ways of working together to achieve it. As we do so, our identity as members of a true leadership population develops and in turn starts to inform and stimulate our leadership. So at Ideas Unlimited we're often working with clients to identify these missions (real shifts in an organisation, not contrived projects) and how to enrol leaders in them.

DEMAND FOR LEADERSHIP DELIVERY

Leadership is notoriously hard to define (just look at the number of attempts still being made) and it tends to be seen as something almost mysterious. To galvanise leaders the work of leadership needs to be made as tangible and expected as any other aspect of their job. So we're working with clients – particularly in technology and fintech – on shifting the focus from inputs (skills, attitudes, mindsets, capabilities, behaviours etc.) to outcomes (what followers, the *users* of leadership, need). As an example, where there is a need for autonomy we're not simply training leaders to create autonomy but making the *demand* for autonomy clear and then measuring the degree to which it is *delivered*. Rather than feeling/being coerced into behaving in a certain way, leaders are finding relevant, effective and authentic ways of delivering autonomy where they are (being who they are).

ASSUMPTIVE ROLE IN ENGAGING OTHERS

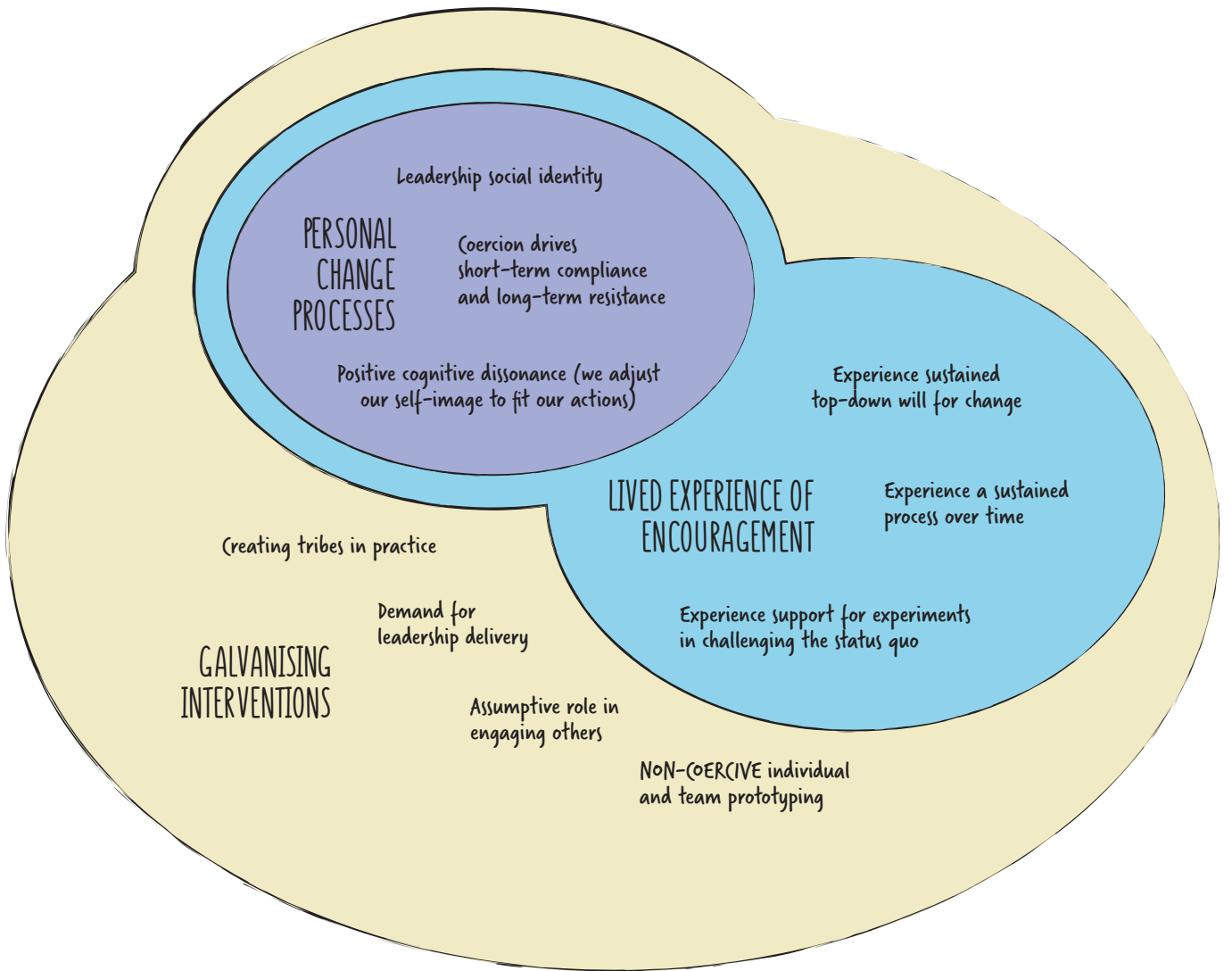
It's not uncommon to talk about leader-led change in organisations. The more people are asked, as it were, to 'teach' what's required the more they have to make sense of it for themselves and the more it becomes part of their identity. This is an example of that social identity and cognitive dissonance at work. *Assuming* that as leaders we will need to be enrolling our teams in a new strategy, for example, is less coercive and more mobilising than the surprisingly common messages about 'getting on the bus'. This works, providing they also have the opportunity to resolve thoroughly their own questions and concerns.

NON-COERCIVE INDIVIDUAL AND TEAM PROTOTYPING

Galvanising leaders to step out and take an organisation in new directions is helped by:

1. being more explicit about the unknown, and then...
2. encouraging and supporting people to take part, not just in identifying new ways of working, but in exploring through experiment and prototype what actually happens when we try to adopt them.

The prescription of behaviours (suggesting we **DO** know how to do it and if everyone can just be like this we'll be fine) is not only unrealistic but risks coercion and perpetuating the kind of parent:child relationship that so often reinforces the failure to 'step up' and take leadership responsibility.



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