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Don't manage: lead

Whatever the next step might be for your career, leadership will become increasingly important. Whether you are moving into a management role for the first time, have been managing for some years, or are looking for ideas about how to increase the influence and development of technical communication in your business, it is leadership that will protect you, and leadership that will open up new opportunities.

This article is a summary of the presentation I will be making at the Technical Communication UK Conference in September. It makes the case for focussing your energies and learning on developing your leadership habits, and will demonstrate what this means in the context of technical communication.

It's about behaviours

Peter Drucker is credited with articulating the relationship between leadership and management better than most corporate gurus over the last 50 years. In his 1992 book Managing for the Future, he wrote:

"The task is to lead people. And the goal is to make productive the specific strengths and knowledge of every individual."

I have found another helpful perspective is that of Warren Bennis in his 1989 book *On Becoming a Leader*, in which he composed a list of the differences:

- The manager administers; the leader innovates.
- The manager is a copy; the leader is an original.
- The manager maintains; the leader develops.
- The manager focuses on systems and structure; the leader focuses on people.
- The manager relies on control; the leader inspires trust.
- The manager has a short-range view; the leader has a long-range perspective.
- The manager asks how and when; the leader asks what and why.
- The manager has his or her eye always on the bottom line; the leader's eye is on the horizon.
- The manager imitates; the leader originates.
- The manager accepts the status quo; the leader challenges it.
- The manager is the classic good soldier; the leader is his or her own person.
- The manager does things right; the leader does the right thing.

Culture eats strategy for breakfast

This aphorism is widely credited to Peter Drucker again, and is a sobering reminder that unless your plans for shifting to more leadership behaviours take into account the culture of the organisation you work in, they'll come to nothing. So, where do you start, and what can you do, whatever the culture?

First you have to stop managing, or stop delivering

You only have so much time, so somehow you need to make time for leading. Drop or delegate some of your delivery or management activities. Focus your delivery on what you are best at: scoping, editing, design, project management, tools troubleshooting, interviewing? Or on where opportunities for leadership will present themselves. You could even just stop doing something and see who notices, and take it as a good sign if no one does.

Raise the bar

For everyone, not just your team. Set standards that deliver far more than your bosses asked, not the grammar standards, or the conventions they use for marking up review comments, but the standards for the design quality of the published output, or the focus, clarity and consistency of what your customers receive, or the integration with translation. Investigate what a leading competitor or other admired or feared organisation does really well, and demonstrate how

your organisation could match or do it better. You only need to raise the bar a little at a time (it's a high-jump metaphor after all!). You'll be able to bring people with you, and have them achieve 'better' without being intimidated. Don't forget to raise your own standards too. What training do you need, what books should you read, what CPD should you invest in for yourself? See Alison Peck's article, 'Your professional development matters' on page 14.

Talk to the people who don't know you

Challenge the assumptions in the business about who you need to talk to: maybe you are plugged into development, and have never spoken to a customer. Maybe your outputs are considered part of marketing, and you've still never spoken to a customer. Actually, have you ever sat down with your target audience and watched them use what you have produced?

The sales team can sometimes be the most revealing. They often use information in unexpected ways, and if there is a specific information need that they have, that you can go away and provide for them, you could have an influential advocate for life.

These new relationships need to be more than just one-off conversations, and initially you will probably need to be more interested in them, and more useful to them than the other way round. You may be challenging long-held assumptions and it will take time, creativity, and patience to shift them.

Speak in the language of your business, not your profession

Ever get the feeling that their eyes are glazing over when you explain what you do for the business? Does the lift start to feel claustrophobic, or the corridor very long? It's time to work on your 'Elevator Pitch', that 30-second summary of what you do that you have memorised for when you meet someone that you probably need to impress. Focus not on what you produce or how, but on the why and on the impact of what you do has on the business. For lots more practical ideas about 'Communicating value' – see Rachel Potts' article on page 22.

Tricky to do, but worth the risk

Be aware that the transition to leading is fraught with danger and this explains why so many prefer to keep

their heads down in management:
- Don't take your eye off delivery – output problems will undermine you.
- Don't confuse being 'in' meetings with influence.
- Leadership quickly turns back into management, if you don't keep going.
- The changes you introduce could make your own role vulnerable so think ahead as to what could be the next leadership challenge.
- Thought leadership is not leadership. It's creating the capability to deliver on a great idea. It's taking people beyond what they are comfortable with: not just pointing, it's actually taking people there.

Ever been at a conference, or read an article and thought, "that's really cool!... But"? Well leadership is what takes you beyond the but. It turns a great idea into something tangible and real. **C**

Further reading

Bennis W (1989) *On Becoming a Leader*, Addison-Wesley

Drucker, P (1992) *Managing for the Future*, Butterworth-Heinemann

Peck A (2013) 'Your professional development matters' *Communicator*, Autumn 2013: 14-15

Potts R (2013) 'Communicating value: part 3', *Communicator*, Autumn 2013: 22-25

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Area groups

The ISTC area groups are an opportunity for technical communicators to network and share knowledge and expertise. The groups are open to everyone from all industries in the local area (you don't even need to be an ISTC member to attend), and it's free. The groups meet at intervals during the year and hold talks, peer discussions, demonstrations and social evenings.

Interest groups give you an opportunity to meet people in your industry. For more information, please contact the relevant organiser.

Interested in attending?
If you're interested in attending or you'd like more information, please contact the local organiser or the ISTC Office istc@istc.org.uk

Interested in setting up a group?
If you'd like to set up a group in your regional area or a specific area of interest, please contact:
Area Groups Manager,
areagroupsmanager@istc.org.uk

LinkedIn (LI) groups
Some of the area groups have their own groups on LinkedIn. Other groups are sub groups of the *Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators* group.

England
Cambridge
Organisers: Derek Cooper, Jeff Bronks
E: cambridge_areagroup@istc.org.uk
LI: Cambridge Technical Communicators

Central South
Organiser: Tony Robinson
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London
Organiser: Claire Hooper
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Midlands
Organiser: John Burns
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North East England
Organiser: Janine Weightman
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North West England
Organiser: David Jones
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LI sub group: ISTC NW Area Group

Southern
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LI sub group: Southern Area Group

Thames Valley
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LI sub group: Thames Valley Area Group

West Midlands
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LI sub group: ISTC West Midlands Area Group

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Scotland
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West of Scotland
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LI sub group: West of Scotland Area Group

Ireland
ISTC Irish Group
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E: irishgroup@istc.org.uk

Irish Technical Writers – an ISTC area group
Organisers: Patrice Fanning, Yvonne Cleary, Bridget Walsh
E: irishtechnicalwriters@istc.org.uk
LI: Irish Technical Writers--An ISTC Area Group

Interest groups
Oil & Gas
Organiser: James Bromley
E: OilandGas@istc.org.uk
LI sub group: ISTC Oil and Gas

MadCap
Organisers: Marjorie Jones, Tom Brindley, Kai Weber
E: MadSIG@istc.org.uk
LI: MadCap UK & Europe Users Group