

Why is visible leadership important?

Imagine for a second that when you start a new job you don't meet with or speak to your manager on your first day. You still haven't after a week. And still nothing after a month...

Without that interaction, engagement and visibility not only would you feel unappreciated and disconnected from the business, but you wouldn't know or understand your position in the organisation, what you should be doing and what outcomes you should be striving towards. This is why visible leadership is important.

Beyond this, there is evidence that shows your employer and indeed the leaders in your organisation are the institutional people you trust the most in the world. The Edelman Trust Barometer tells us the most credible source of information is employer communications, at 63% trusted, above the government at 58% and 51% for the media. Leaders have a responsibility to step up to this privileged position we give them.

There is also overwhelming evidence to show that engaged staff drive better outcomes for organisations. NHS providers with high levels of staff engagement (as measured in the annual NHS Staff Survey) tend to have lower levels of patient mortality, make better use of resources and deliver stronger financial performance (West and Dawson 2012).

Engaged staff are more likely to have the emotional resources to show empathy and compassion, despite the pressures they work under.



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More than being seen

Visible leadership is more than just being seen. It is an absolute commitment of the board to lead a culture that clearly shows an organisation's values and mission while taking colleague and citizen feedback into account. It is complete transparency between leadership and colleagues.

To enable this, a two-way dialogue is key – and it requires more than just talking and listening. Action should always be taken, whether this means applying feedback in a practical way or outlining why it shouldn't or can't be implemented.

When developing a strategic direction leadership teams should engage all colleagues. Not only do colleagues on the ground see elements of an organisation that leaders don't see but also, as outlined earlier, there is alignment between engagement and outcomes. This, in turn, leads to colleagues feeling trusted and engaged, which aligns with autonomy.

Ultimately, if work and decisions are able to take place with integrity across an organisation it will be more efficient and deliver better, aligned outcomes. Allowing autonomy is just as important as leaders showing they are steering the ship.

Colleague and indeed stakeholder and citizen voices should also be heard in the board room. Not all decisions can be made with a committee of hundreds in one space, but engaging on decisions, bringing this engagement back into the board room and then feeding back to the organisation about how and why a decision has been reached drives transparency and good decision-making.

Being a good leader at a time when we are all forced to rely more than ever on digital engagement is twice as hard. To counterbalance this, leaders should be increasing the time they spend proactively engaging with their colleagues. It should be one of the main parts of any leader's role.

How to develop a transparent and trusting culture

- Ensure you have a diverse leadership team who are both visible and impactful in their provisions to board and colleagues.
- If working in a large organisation, align each board member with different areas of the business, key stakeholders and stakeholders to be their voice when decisions are being made.
- Introduce systems to ensure individual objectives align with organisational objectives, providing autonomy and power to colleagues in the process.
- Share the small wins as well as the big – a colleague introducing something brilliant is as important and powerful as the board making a key decision.
- Ensure there is line of sight both down and up the organisation; make the reporting of progress and data easy, transparent and clearly aligned to goals.
- Allow failure and don't give up.

How to increase leadership and colleague dialogue

- Develop a weekly CEO blog outlining what is happening at the top, responding to colleague needs and offering an honest dialogue about organisational performance.
- Encourage the full leadership team to regularly update Twitter and LinkedIn, with a focus on engagement with staff.
- Run video-led face-to-face meetings in protected time so that as many colleagues can attend as possible; ensure there is time for questions.
- Initiate weekly hour-long open-door sessions hosted by a board member, where colleagues can book 5/10 minutes slots to discuss whatever they want.
- Ensure that a member of the leadership team attends all team meetings once every six months.
- Where possible, appropriate and safe, visit people on the ground by going "back to the floor".
- Don't forget, delegating power and providing autonomy is as important as the visibility itself.