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INTRODUCTION

Every age produces leaders who are of and for their times, and some who are completely outside it – the game-changers and radicals who unshackle the past, coolly assess the present, and push on into the future. For good or ill, they think differently, make waves, create events, and effect change. They may be history, but they haven’t gone quietly; leaders tend to leave their mark.

With millennia of leadership to draw on, peopled by a colourful cast of extraordinary characters, it’s tempting to think the book of leadership is written. It isn’t. Leadership is evolving, shape-shifting, adapting to the demands of living and working in a fast-moving, hyper-linked, and fiercely competitive global economy. We can agree that every business sector needs leaders and visionaries to succeed, but it would be a mistake to believe that there’s a universally applicable set of skills, a perfect blend of skills and attributes that can be folded into any business model. One size rarely fits all, and interchangeable parts generally don’t.

In the service-led luxury hospitality sector, the leadership ingredient list would be a heady brew of soft skills and business savvy, someone who is both circumspect and bold, capable of seeing the finest detail and the whole canvas at the same time, a skilled communicator blessed with a flawless ability to select and motivate the right people.

We don’t doubt that person exists. We also know that leaders are drawn from a pool of ordinary mortals, and don’t arrive fully formed. Leaders learn, adapt, and carefully pick their route through the leadership maze. The Luxury Academy’s 12-step route to successful leadership is for them.
“You should say what you mean,” said the March Hare. “I do,” Alice hastily replied. “At least, I mean what I say – that’s the same thing, you know.”

- Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll
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Part 1

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1. Communicate

Probably the attribute most closely associated with successful leadership is the ability to communicate. Unpick the web shrouding any failing business, and poor communication from the top will usually be found lurking at its heart, creating doubt, ambiguity, speculation and, finally, the deafening sound of the void.

Successful leadership depends on making sure staff know where the hotel is going, and how the business will get there. The first step is to communicate this vision clearly, concisely, and unambiguously, without obscuring meaning or intention with jargon, management-speak, overwrought metaphor, or the latest hip phraseology.

It’s also the second, third, and every step along the way; communication is ongoing and continuous, and underpins every thought, act and deed. For leadership to be successful, the channels of communication need to be open, tuned, and travelling both ways: transmitting and receiving.

“Where go my people? I must find out where they are going so I can lead them.”
- (Alexandre Auguste Ledru-Rollin)
2. Communicate with others

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The age of communication is well and truly here. We can e-mail memos, distribute newsletters, announce new initiatives, and produce reports in the blink of an eye. Invaluable as this is, the trick is not to be a hyperactive electronic communicator, and not to mistake it for dialogue.

Leaders who spend time in conversation with employees have a better, more rounded sense of the hotel as a whole — what works well, what doesn’t, how staff morale is holding up, and what training is needed.

More than this, meaningful dialogue has the capacity to make staff feel engaged, valued, motivated and loyal. There are places where a distant, remote leadership, removed from the gears and wheels of an organisation, probably still works. A hotel is not one of these. For successful leadership in a luxury hotel, know your staff, remember their names, understand what they do, and find out who they are.

If electronic communication is not to become so much white noise, use it sparingly in lock-step with actual, spoken, back-and-forth dialogue between the leadership, management and the team.
3. Listening in

“Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care.”
- (Theodore Roosevelt)

Dialogue is not only an exchange of ideas and perceptions. It’s an exchange of listening. People like to talk, but they like to know they are being heard even more.

The English language gifts us the distinction, particularly useful for the aspiring leader, between hearing and listening. “Did you hear what she said?” is a very different question from, “Did you listen to what she said?”. We’ll happily describe someone as a good listener; we pass no comment on a good hearer.

Good listening is vital for building sustainable, and sustaining, relationships and connections between leaders and led. It yields a rich harvest of hard information, and the less visible moodscape of the hotel.

To listen well, tune into the verbal and non-verbal language of the speaker. To listen freely, put your own agenda to one side to make it less likely that you’ll hear what you want to hear. To listen fruitfully, be open to fresh thinking and ideas.
4. Communicate with yourself

“If thou thinkest twice before thou speakest once, thou wilt speak twice the better for it.”
- (William Penn)

Effective communication starts with how you communicate with yourself. If that sounds a little strange, try a simple experiment. When you’re facing a particularly intractable difficulty, or a new target seems dauntingly difficult to achieve, take a moment to stand back and assess how you’re thinking about it. What words do you use? How would look if it were written down?

If your first line is, “Why can’t I solve this?”, a dead weight of negativity is already pressing down on your thinking about possible solutions. It’s best not to start from there. A better way in is to ask yourself, “How can I solve this?”. This simple inversion is more than a trick; it’s open, alive to possibility, and redefines the borders of your thinking.

A further tweak to the wiring is to allow time for second thoughts. Leaders often give the appearance of living in cloudless uplands of limitless inspiration and creativity, but behind each cloth of gold is a network of loose threads – also known as first thoughts, second thoughts, and perhaps a few more. Once the idea is ready to be taken into the world, a successful leader never lets on that they’re there; the magic is all in the weave.
Five communication take-aways

1. *Know what you’re talking about* – Hone your knowledge to the finest point before taking it to the team, and never bluff; if you don’t know the answer to a question, say so. Never pass up an opportunity to find out what you don’t know.

2. *Mean what you say, and say what you mean* – before a word is spoken, be sure that you are expressing yourself in a way that has the best chance of being understood.

3. *Leave jargon at the door* – few things distance a speaker from his audience faster than a dusting of impenetrable jargon or management-speak. Leaders are translators of ideas into words.

4. *Silence is golden.* Communication carries on long after everyone has stopped speaking. Silences and pauses are beats of time to collect a thought, look around, gauge reactions, and make sure everyone is still with you.

5. *Communication isn’t all about you* – it’s about how your communication is received, and what communications come back.
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Part 2
5. Emotional Literacy

“There is no use our mounting on stilts, for on stilts we must still walk on our own legs.”

- (Michel de Montaigne)

In the past, leadership has been associated with measurable, quantifiable knowledge, admission into the best schools and universities, a sparkingly blue-chip CV, and assertiveness bordering on bullishness.

Emotional literacy, or Emotional Intelligence (EI), is having its day, though not without a background rumble of dissent from the Master of the Universe school of leadership. In a hotel, where a large staff serve a large number of people, it finds its natural home.

So what is emotional literacy? It’s very simple: understanding people (social awareness), understanding yourself (self-awareness), and building relationships that work. In practice, it means understanding what saying thank you to a member of staff or team who has performed well means to them, why a smile and open body language tends to get people on your side before a word has been exchanged, and why people behave and react the way they do.

People are works-in-progress, learning, adapting, communicating and negotiating. Leaders who understand this - about others, about themselves - tend to create better and more successful relationships with employees and customers, and better businesses.
6. Authenticity, honesty and truth

“This above all: to thine own self be true
- (William Shakespeare)

When a leader takes a place at the meeting table or stands at a lectern, our attention is focused as much on who they are as what they have to say. The focus of this lens can be unforgiving if that leader is not fully present: to their audience and, crucially, to themselves.

Leaders arrive at a position of leadership not only because they have experience, knowledge and imagination, and are able to communicate in all the ways we’ve already discussed. They are leaders because of who they are, an alchemical blend of individual characteristics and authenticity.

A leader doesn’t have to be what’s often called a Big Personality to succeed (all personalities are big enough for those who inhabit them). What they do have to be is honest and truthful to themselves. The level of scrutiny applied to a leader ensures that even a moment’s inauthenticity will have consequences – doubt creeps in, confidence is shaken, trust bleeds away.

History has taught us that investing leaders with untrammelled power, wielded at a distance from the staff, is fraught with peril. Successful leadership is now a question of what the leader brings to the organisation from within the self, as well as her expertise and experience – qualities such as instinct, imagination, and the ability to create a business culture that nourishes the business and its people.

Know thyself, said the Greeks. And, the Delphic oracle might have added, once you know thyself, be thyself.
7. Imagine, inspire

“We can be heroes.”
- (David Bowie)

That isn’t to say there isn’t an element of performance in being a successful leader. There will be set-piece addresses to give, radical ideas to communicate, transformations to start and complete. Imagination and vision is only half the story. The rest is inspiration, helping people to believe that the plan that has emerged from your thinking and imagination is achievable.

Inspired people are energetic people. Look at the Team GB medal haul in the London Olympics for a perfect blend of training and inspiration, competing in an aura of self-belief and shared goals. Targets were exceeded, and each success played a part in feeding the next. The narrative changed: we are winners.

It’s arguable that the role of leadership in this has been under-examined, but it’s also arguable that this is the point of leadership: to create the conditions for success with a series of deft strokes and bold initiatives created in a spirit of collaboration, topped off with a set-piece event or address, and then get out of the way.
8. Culture shows

“Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.”
- (Henry Ford)

Leadership isn’t only defined by measurable results. Leadership isn’t always about making big decisions. It’s also about the daily work of setting the tone, and creating a culture.

Take two hotels. We’ll call them Hotel City and Hotel Town. Let’s suppose that both are identically appointed on the same sunny side of the street in a fashionable quarter of town. Both are fully booked, F&B is well stocked, the front desk fully staffed, housekeeping smoothly run. So far, so good.

Let’s suppose that both hotels have guest books. In Hotel City, guests comment on the hotel, the atmosphere, service, and the willingness of the staff to make them welcome and comfortable. Staff members are singled out for praise. The guest promises to return.

Hotel Town’s guests are happy enough with the standards of the hotel, but there’s the troubling background sound of observably unhappy, unsmiling staff going through the motions in a cloud of gloom and despondency.

The difference is in the culture of each hotel, which comes straight from the top, percolates through management, and filters all the way through to the kitchen, the workshop, and the laundry room. Leaders set the tone of the culture, and take its pulse: how do people feel about coming to work? How are stress levels? Is the hotel losing staff or unable to recruit the right people? Who do staff and management talk to about concerns, and which doors are open to them? Is there a training strategy? Do staff feel involved? Do they feel as if they have a stake?

Hotel City’s leader asked these questions – and answered them.
Defining leadership: five hallmarks

1. **Understanding people** – what motivates them, when to praise and reward, how to build relationships, and why it matters. EI is the natural partner of IQ.

2. **Master or servant?** Who is in the service of whom? A leader provides leadership services to the hotel just as the staff provide services to guests.

3. **The real you** – successful leaders have a highly developed self-knowledge and are comfortable in their skins; a good place to lead from.

4. **Cultured leadership** – a hotel’s culture is determined by its leadership and how the hotel is led on a day-to-day basis.

5. **Inspirational leaders don’t always sound trumpets and lead parades.** Successful leaders often create the conditions for success through imagination, communication, and inspiration.
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9. Decision-making and dissent

“Towards the fullest truth, the least partial good.” – (George Eliot, Middlemarch)

Leaders are defined by the decisions they make - and how they make them. There are as many decision-making processes as there are styles of leadership, from top-down commands to round-table discussions.

There’s no wrong way to take decisions, but there are plenty of wrong decisions to take. The trick is to assess which approach is best suited to the question in hand. Some are time-dependent, and need the sure-footed imprint of a leader in touch with his instincts, while other decisions need time for deliberation, fact-finding and consultation. Others don’t need to be on the leader’s desk at all; these can - and should - be delegated. Inevitably, decisions need to be taken that are controversial and unpopular, triggering argument and dissent – or, depending on your leadership style - disagreement and debate.

The working reality at the leader’s desk is a daunting mixture of all of these. The art of leadership is knowing how to keep people on board when big decisions are taken, being able to think quickly when time is short, and judging when it’s time to let go of the reins. Most importantly, a leader needs to be able to justify the decision he has made to the organisation, its staff, and to himself.

Leaders exist to be disagreed with; as game-changers and free-thinkers, sooner or later a leader will bump up against controversy. Open, reasoned debate stands a better chance of bringing the team on side; indeed a consultative, collaborative approach often presents the only route through the morass. Successful leadership is not always about being right. It’s about being informed.
10. The gentle art of saying no

“The art of leadership is in saying no, not yes. It is very easy to say yes.”

- (Tony Blair)

Leaders are often judged by what they do, and by what they refuse. It isn’t easy. Refusals are often accompanied by the fluttery demons of what-ifs, and nothing changes the mood music faster than having to say No to someone’s pet project, request, or new idea.

The unfortunate truth is that saying No is an essential building-block for success. If the word didn’t exist, it’s highly likely a leader would waste no time in inventing it. Saying No is all that lies between becoming impossibly stretched, losing focus, and finding themselves in murky territory, far from their area of expertise. Performance suffers, leadership is weakened, and perceptions shift. Unpalatable a truth it may be, but we tend to distrust people who say yes to everything.

Mastering the art of saying No is high on the list of ingredients for success. In the hands of a skilled leader, the word No is surprisingly amenable to nuance. No can be alive to possibility (“This is a good idea, but it won’t work now; let’s see where we are in a year’s time”). No can be an opportunity to build relationships (“Although we can’t do this, it’s a brilliant idea – let’s talk some more”). No can be converted into energy and focus (“If we do X, we won’t have time to do Y, which everyone agrees is a priority”).

Leaders find ways of saying No that suits them, their style, and their philosophy of leadership. It may well be one of the first skills to master.
11. Tackling the obstacle course

“There is a crack in everything; that’s how the light gets in.”
(Leonard Cohen)

Between the vision and the reality lies a rocky terrain. Leaders and managers can draw a map based on what has gone before but this is a journey into the future, and there’s nothing like feeling the ground beneath your feet.

There will be unexpected obstacles, unlooked-for encounters with whatever was crouching at the margins ready to pounce, and fissures in the landscape. The question for the leader is this: go round them or through them?

How this question is answered is one of the defining characteristics of leadership. The destination matters, but so does the journey, and it’s the journey that offers the best opportunities to adapt the vision to the terrain.

A leader’s vision is the product of thought, creativity, and inspiration. The first stage of its evolution is a blueprint, a diagram, a map where X marks the spot. The journey is the point at which leaders and managers hold the vision up to the light and plot the soundest course.
12 Develop a leadership style

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A thought experiment: think of three leaders. Choose from any sector, any area of life, whether politics, religion, business, arts, academia, or sport, and not necessarily leaders you admire or wish to emulate.

Once you have three leaders, try to see what they have in common, other than leadership. Are there any unifying characteristics, any observable similarities between them?

“Personality goes a long way.”
- (Jules, Pulp Fiction)
The leadership maze: five hints and tips

1. Make the right kind of decision in the right way – there’s more than one way to crack an egg, the saying goes, and there’s more than one way to arrive at a decision. The art of leadership is knowing when to consult, when to decide, and when to delegate.

2. Defend your corner – good decisions are the result of vision, creativity, and well-marshalled argument. Rehearse arguments, tap them to hear the sound they make, and be open to suggestions. Being informed is better than being wrong.

3. Find five ways to say No – Find ways to refuse, decline, reject, demur – in other words, say no to demands that you have assessed as unworkable, ill-timed, or likely to derail something else.

4. Be prepared to go the long way round – sometimes, the journey offers more than the destination. Be ready to see from other angles. Flaws can tell you as much – if not more – than perfections.

5. Dare to be – leadership is individuality. Evolve your leadership style according to who you are and what you want to achieve.

Conclusion

Ideas of leadership evolve, so it’s hardly surprising that leaders are in the process of evolving too. No leader arrives at the top fully formed, armed with all the answers, in full certainty that everything they do will work. Successful leaders learn on the job. In the rarefied world of the luxury hospitality industry, there is a lot to learn. This is also one of the few sectors that draws its leaders from the widest pool of people, including those who started their hospitality careers at the very roots. It’s no accident that leadership courses in luxury hospitality focus so strongly on ensuring trainees have as broad an experience of the day-to-day operation of a hotel as possible.

The old saw of whether leaders are born or made hasn’t been put to rest. The living, working reality of luxury hotels across the world suggests that the answer is a happy compromise: leaders find the essential skills within them. What they lack, they learn, through training, through experience, and – simplest of all - by being there.
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The Luxury Academy are experts in Leadership Training for all levels of Supervisors and Managers.

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