

Defining respectful leadership

by Niels van Quaquebeke

Research shows that employees value respectful leadership very highly. But what is it exactly? Can it be measured, and is it possible for managers to determine if they give it to their employees?

The word 'respect' is a complex one, offering as it does a variety of meanings depending on the context in which it is used and even the age group applying it. This is because there are many different types of respect. People's respect for nature, or for the law, for example, is different from the respect they have for other people. The latter we define as *interpersonal respect*.

When discussing interpersonal respect it is necessary to differentiate at least two fundamentally different

kinds of respect. *Appraisal respect* is given to those people we perceive to have superior skills, knowledge or expertise in a domain that is of relevance to us. People might, for instance, respect managers for their visionary leadership, or physicists for their handling of numbers, or even athletes for their self-discipline. This kind of respect is also known as *vertical respect* because it structures hierarchies of influence within certain domains.

The second, *recognition respect*, relates to a more general mindset we have towards others as being of equal worth. We also refer to it as *horizontal respect* because it describes an acknowledgement of others as being on the same level. Essentially, such respect is shown in how people interact with others, in particular in how they take the needs of others into account in their actions.

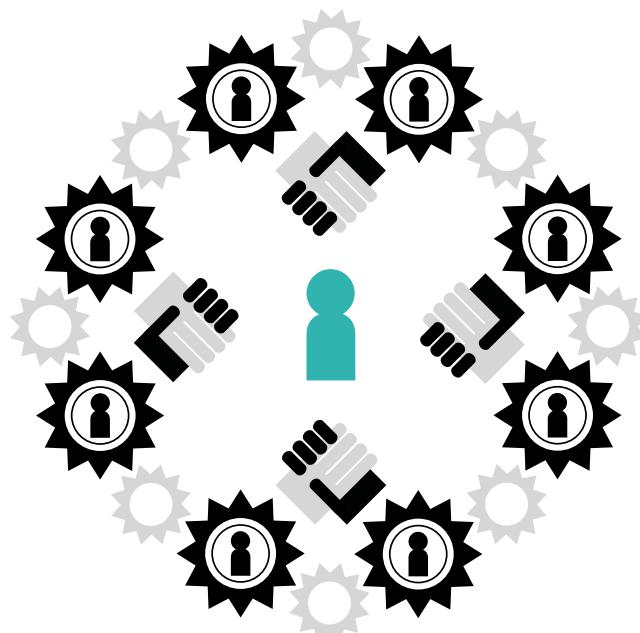
What is respectful leadership?

The study of respectful leadership is about identifying which behaviours from leaders signal to subordinates that they are of equal worth - even given the hierarchical nature of most

workplaces. Research on work values shows that respectful leadership is highly desired by employees. Understanding that respect is a two-way street, when exploring how it relates to leadership, the key is not to ask the leaders, but to seek the perspectives of those that make up the second half of the equation: the followers. What do they see as respectful leadership and under what circumstances do they feel respected or disrespected by their leaders?

To determine this we conducted a study with almost 500 employees and asked for critical instances where they felt that respect had or had not been shown. This allowed us to develop 149 standardised statements defining leadership behaviours aligned to respect, which we then distilled to 12 that accurately captured the essence of the answer to the question "what is respectful leadership?" This gave us a means of creating a respectful leadership scale (Fig 1).

When applied to matters of respect, the karmic idiom "what goes around comes around" advises that how we treat others is how they will treat us. However, the truth is much broader than that. Our research shows that receiving respectful treatment from a superior can make us feel very group oriented. Such actions encourage us to spread our own respectfulness, not



just in a reciprocal fashion to those who gave us respect, but to the whole group or team to which we belong.

So how does this benefit leadership? Well, it's actually quite straightforward. There is often the notion in management that if you treat employees too nicely, with too much respect, that the effectiveness of leaders is weakened. Indeed, managers are often taught that it is very difficult to be a popular leader and run a successful company.

Being "nice" and being respectful are not the same however, and through our studies we find that where a leader gives respect to employees, a powerful consequence is that it is much easier for those employees to identify with and follow the leader. Indeed, as those who follow management thinking will be aware, this employee/leader

identification is considered one of the pillars of modern leadership style.

Leadership, after all, is about people. It is not primarily about developing organisational objectives and implementing them throughout the enterprise. The true task of leaders is to engage people and convince them to follow you. Leaders can be measured by the degree of followership that they have. Without followership leaders cannot expect to present their objectives, corporate or otherwise, and have subordinates willingly strive towards those goals.

The psychology of respectful leadership

Psychology tells us that humans have fundamental psychological needs. There is a need for autonomy: we want

to feel in control of our lives and of situations. We have a need for relatedness: we need to feel that there is a social bond between us and other people. There is also a need for competence: it is important to us to feel that we are of value and that what we do matters. Together, these three needs form self-determination. Respectful leadership as an action fosters self-determination as an experience for the follower. Through this experience it becomes much easier for the individual to identify with the leader and their vision.

A leader who consults with their subordinates, respects their expertise and value to the organisation, finds out how they want to be treated and what they consider is respectful to them, sends out a powerful message, one that actively encourages followership. Horizontal respect given out by leaders comes back to them as vertical respect. So, the more leaders treat employees respectfully, the more employees will respond with vertical respect, and the more they are open to the influence of the leader.

In our latest research, we looked at how leaders can communicate with subordinates in a way that expresses respectful leadership and found that question asking, combined with appreciative listening, is central to respectful leadership. Asking questions ▶

Fig 1. The 12-item respectful leadership scale: My leader...

1 ... trusts my ability to independently and self-reliantly perform well.	7 ... does not try to hold me responsible for his/her own mistakes.
2 ... expresses criticism in an objective and constructive way.	8 ... unequivocally stands up for me and my work against third parties.
3 ... recognises me as a full-fledged counterpart.	9 ... provides me with any information that is relevant to me
4 ... recognises my work.	10...takes me and my work seriously
5 ... shows a genuine interest in my opinions and assessments.	11...interacts in an open and honest way with me.
6 ... treats me in a polite manner.	12...treats me in a fair way.

Defining respectful leadership (continued)

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engages people. However, its negative effect is pretty obvious if someone asks you a question and then starts playing with their Blackberry whilst you give them your answer.

If I ask you how you are doing and attentively listen in an appreciative way, then this simple action has very positive consequences. By asking and giving you the respect to respond freely, you cannot help but feel a sense of control over the situation. Inherent in the question is the relinquishing of control of the conversation to the person being asked.

philosophies, which are primarily focused on visionary leadership, one that presents a clear path to the future or a predetermined set of goals.

Unquestionably, it is the job of leaders to make decisions and to reduce uncertainty. The respectful leader will not make decisions in isolation, but instead will make a point of asking the opinions of their followers. By asking and listening to opinions, not only does the leader engage followers and show respect by doing so, but parallel to that the leader helps fulfil the basic, psychological needs outlined earlier.

increasing revenues and as leaders report on the bottom line at shareholder meetings there is a tendency for them to forget how that is ultimately achieved – through the efforts and commitment of people.

Not only can respectful leadership make an organisation a great place to work, but it also offers additional and not insignificant benefits for employer branding, recruitment, staff retention and more. A happy and stable workforce contributes to reduced costs, and our research shows that through respectful leadership organisations can achieve improvements in performance.

Leaders are free to use our 12-item leadership scale within their organisation. They should actively learn how they fare in the eyes of their employees in terms of respectful leadership. From this perspective the diagnostic aspect of the scale is useful for organisations wishing to implement respectful leadership or indeed, improve upon it. ■

“Through respectful leadership organisations can achieve improvements in performance.”

Conversation is a very powerful means of showing to other people that they are of value: it expresses that the individual is worth talking to and that you respect them. This fulfils the inherent human need for competence mentioned earlier: if I engage in conversation with you then it must be because I believe that what you have to say is of value.

Question asking is thus a very respectful way of communicating. By the same token, it is a very different way of communicating leadership than that taught by dominant management

Initial results from our studies are very enlightening and explicitly show how well this type of interaction works.

The benefits of respectful leadership

By being able to better identify with leaders and leadership goals, the employee experience is enhanced. Essentially, employees become happier and their motivation increases in an environment where they feel respected, the value of neither of which should be underestimated. The prime motivation of business tends to be generating and

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