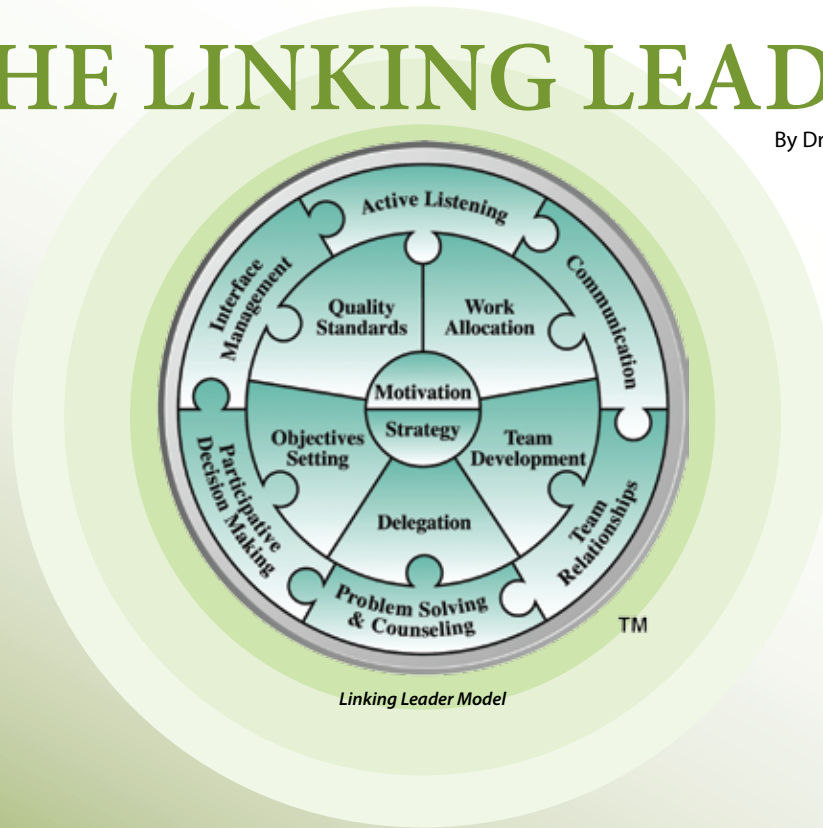


THE LINKING LEADER

By Dr Dick McCann



For the last twenty-five years I have been involved in management training and development and although many of the 'buzz words' have changed, the need for good leadership has not. The world is changing at an ever-faster rate but managing organisational change is nothing new. Change has been happening for centuries, even before the industrial revolution.

What is different, though, is the speed at which leaders need to change their thinking to cope with technology and its impact on their organisations. Business models have been greatly affected by the new tools available – e-commerce, m-commerce, e-learning and the like – and today's leaders need to be adaptable in every aspect of their role. These tools have shrunk the world and introduced the era of globalization where geographical boundaries are less important and global account management becomes the norm.

The new technologies have in many ways dis-empowered leaders by making them much more dependent upon their senior managers and advisers. In this era of the knowledge explosion, the key data that an organisation needs is held by many different people. What often differentiates successful leaders from not-so-successful leaders is their ability to understand, co-ordinate, influence and motivate their staff. These are the social competence skills that are now essential for organisational success. I call them the skills of the **Linking Leader**.

LINKING SKILLS



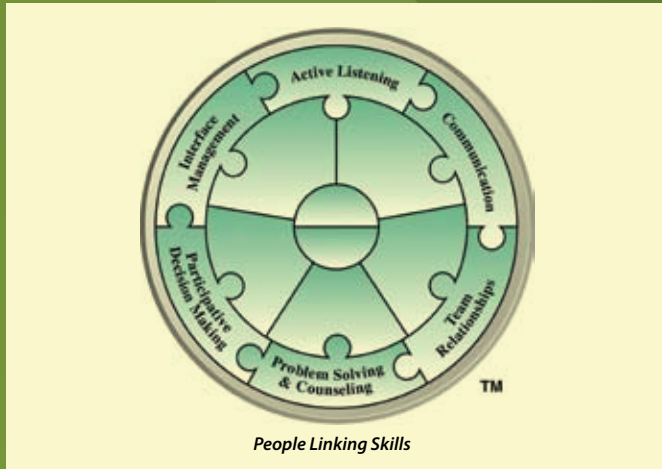
Some of you will be familiar with the Team Management Wheel (www.TeamManagementSystems.com) and the ideas behind work preferences – these concepts have been invaluable to team members, helping them understand the behaviour of colleagues at work. At the centre of this wheel is *Linking*, defined originally by Charles Margerison and myself as the 11 skills of linking. These core skills need to be

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implemented by all team members if the team is to be successful. For the *leader* of the team I subsequently identified two more skills, giving rise to the 13 skills of the **Linking Leader**.

THE PEOPLE LINKING SKILLS

Six of the linking skills are associated with people skills. These are the skills that create the atmosphere in which the team works. They promote harmony and trust.



People Linking Skills

Communication covers the concept of 'pacing' where team members need to vary their communication style to match the preferences of the person they are talking to. This enhances rapport and leads to better outcomes.

Active listening means 'listening' to others and showing them that you are interested in what they say by asking questions, building on what they say, and summarizing what has been said.

Good **team relationships** are essential if your team is to become high performing. If there is a lack of respect, understanding and trust in the team, then there is no real team.

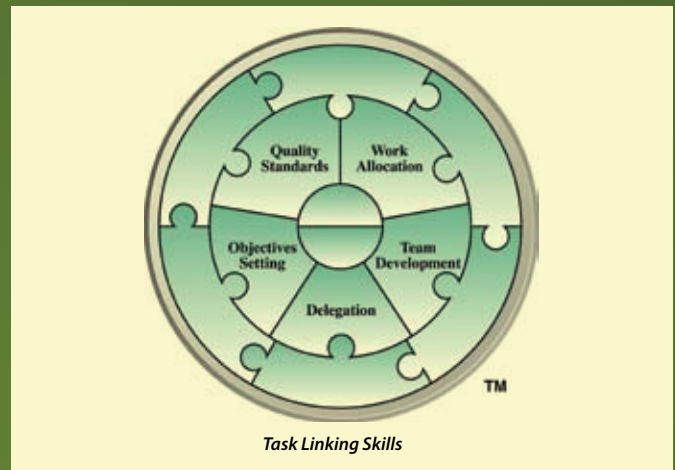
Problem solving & counseling means that team members will be available and responsive when other team members have a problem.

Participative Decision making is important so that action can take place. Team members need to be involved in decision making on key issues so that there is joint ownership of solutions and commitment to their implementation.

Interface management is a term used to describe the process of managing the links between each team member (internal linking) and between team members and key external stakeholders (external linking).

THE TASK LINKING SKILLS

Five of the linking skills are related to team tasks. These are the skills that create a solid core or foundation on which the work of the team relies. They promote confidence and stability.



Task Linking Skills

Work Allocation as a linking skill means assigning tasks to team members according to their competencies and preferences.

Research has shown that all teams must perform well in the eight sectors of the Team Management Wheel. If the team is unbalanced in terms of role preferences, there is a possibility that the non-preference areas might become a low priority for the team. If this is the case, then the team needs to plan ways of developing skills in areas that are not preferences. In doing so they are implementing the skill of **Team Development**.

Delegation is important for senior team members who have staff reporting to them. It is a process of training and coaching people so that they can develop competence. Competence leads to confidence, which then leads to trust.

Teams without clear **Objectives** will fail. Research has shown that teams with clear goals that are actually delivered take pride in their work. This leads to improved team morale and motivation. By concentrating on the outputs and outcomes, the energy of the team can be focused on results. Teams where the 'goal posts' are constantly changing are usually low performing. Team members may work hard but their efforts are spread in all different directions.

All teams should strive for quality in everything they do. Quality is the key to organisational success and makes the difference between successful and unsuccessful organisations. **Quality standards** in teamwork means having standards and procedures that everyone must follow. These standards are those that meet the expectations of the client.

THE LEADER LINKING SKILLS

Two additional linking skills are essential for team leaders – the skills of **motivation** and **strategy**.

Effective leaders articulate a compelling vision of the team's future. If people are to give of their best they need to have a clear picture of what lies ahead. In addition they need to be persuaded that this vision is worth pursuing and it is here that the *linking leader*

has a real chance to **motivate** the team. Along with the vision there needs to be a set of clear goals that act as beacons to follow. A leader who focuses unwaveringly on these goals will inspire team members to give of their best.

It is important for a linking leader to take a stand when controversial issues arise affecting the team. Team members need to know that someone is out there 'fighting' for them and being an advocate for the team. If team members feel justifiably ill-treated by some issue or situation, then it is important for the leader to put the case strongly to senior people in the organisation. When team members feel there is someone standing up for them, often in unpleasant circumstances, then they will be more willing to 'go that extra mile' and respond to what the leader wants from them.



Effective leaders inspire team members to perform. This is particularly important when setbacks occur and people have become de-motivated. At these times it is important to understand how everyone is feeling and use the skills of 'leading' to encourage team members to put the past behind them and look towards a 'rosy' future. People will give of their best when they have high hopes for the future and it is the *linking leader's* role to encourage and maintain this.

Business issues are complex and survival depends on thinking and acting strategically. Organisations are systemic, part of a huge cybernetic system where outputs from one part become inputs to another. It is sometimes difficult to keep all these elements in focus and factor them into the decision-making process. It is important to differentiate between the 'quick fix' and the underlying root cause of any problems. A good example from everyday life is the headache. The 'quick fix' is an aspirin but this doesn't solve the long-term problem which could be any number of defects in other parts of the body. A strategic thinker will spend time looking for the root cause, considering the interaction of all elements involved in any complex issue.

A *linking leader* needs to have the skills of strategic thinking and strategic planning. A team wants to know not only 'where it is going'

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and this requires the ability to think ahead and to analyze situations clearly and logically. However a vision without action planning is not sufficient and it is here that the *linking leader* needs the ability to think ahead and 'see' potential problems before they arise.

THE LINKING LEADER PROFILE

The 13 skills of the Linking Leader can be measured through a multi-rater questionnaire where as many raters as necessary can be used to gather feedback on a person's linking leader skills. The net result is a comprehensive leadership report - *The Linking Leader Profile* - that forms the basis for a plan of action coaching and development.

IN SUMMARY

Being aware of the skills of the *linking leader* is not enough. They are skills that need developing, just like any other. Each skill needs to be discussed within the team and where necessary audited on a regular basis.

- Good performance on the five task skills prepares the ground for efficient outputs.
- Good performance on the six people skills establishes an atmosphere of harmony.
- Good performance on the two leadership skills provides inspiration and direction.

Together all three comprise the skills of the *linking leader*, resulting in leadership excellence and outstanding team performance.



Dr Dick McCann is the co-founder of Team Management Systems (TMS) and is currently Managing Director of TMS Asia Pacific and a Director of TMS Development International, UK. He is also Director of the Institute of Team Management Studies. Dr McCann is the author of The Workplace Wizard – the definitive guide to workplace behaviour and How to Influence others at Work. He is co-author of The Half-Empty Chalice, Team Management – Practical New Approaches, and Aesops Management Fables. Visit www.tms.com.au.