
Four Steps to Securing Your Leadership Mandate



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Stop hiding your leadership light under a bushel. Achieving the legitimacy you deserve in your organisation entails a sequential process.

Unlikely though it may seem, an episode of the reality show *Survivor* from 2001 provides a salutary lesson for leaders everywhere. Two teams were marooned on a desert island to compete for a cash prize. Participants were ordinary folk who struggled in the harsh terrain. Thus, it was all the more surprising when both teams quickly voted out their only member with the survival skills needed. At the core lay allegations of bossiness and control-freakery when most wanted to work together as a team. This example shows that you can have the exact experience your organisation needs, know what needs doing, and be in the right place at the right time to make it happen. Yet this may count for nothing if you are ineffectively positioned to lead.

Over the years, I observed how a weak mandate can cause leadership to unravel, from cases in the public domain and privately with clients. I rolled all this experience into a fictional character, Jon. When he faces all-too-common dilemmas, four fundamental steps help secure his leadership.

1. Connect with authentic purpose

Jon was disappointed when his efforts were disregarded. Heading up HR with a seat on the board, he had the expertise and drive to get things done. But while his initiatives were technically sound, colleagues perceived they did not add up to much. It became obvious that neither the HR function nor Jon himself were highly rated. Disillusioned, he sought a coach, thinking he needed to develop influencing skill and gravitas. Surprisingly, the advice was to take a different course.

It started by helping Jon review his signature strengths and values. He realised that at heart he was motivated to be a transformational leader. The focus then turned to the core business and its outlook. Jon was guided to review the Board's strategy with fresh eyes, and found it wanting. This led him to a bolder view on the trajectory of their evolving business, which re-defined HR as a guide for organisational changes to come.

Critically, Jon had pivoted from a functional to an enterprise mind-set. Previously, he viewed his company's affairs through an HR lens – a form of tunnel vision that prevented him from seeing across the organisation. This shift helped him engage in collective decision-making with his board, often in a sense-making capacity where business change was involved. Instead of feeling marginalised, he grew motivated by the difference his leadership brought. While this did not happen overnight, without the critical pivot it would not have happened at all.

Jon had discovered the power of leadership alignment. This happens when you connect what you stand for in business with your company's core value proposition. The more authentically the two align, the more attuned you are to opportunity and risk. Your reputation for smart sense-making strengthens your leadership standing.

But what if that alignment doesn't naturally occur? What if discovering your inner purpose puts you at odds with your board's ethics, or your job's basic requirements? It's the stuff of which mid-life crises are made. You look up from years of busyness to find the role you worked so hard for is no longer for you. It's hard to excel when your inner rudder tugs your attention away. When this happens, consider a move – you and the business will be better off for it.

Entrepreneurs such as Sir Richard Branson succeed by growing ventures in their own guise. In a viable business with which you identify, if stated ways of working reflect actual ways of working, and match your way of leading, then you are in the right place at the right time.

It does not mean you operate in an echo chamber, however.

2. Grow perspective through cognitive diversity

Jon knew that diversity was increasingly for board agendas, but the subject elicited low enthusiasm from his fellow directors, whom Jon privately perceived as “male and stale”. Nevertheless, they agreed that senior levels should better represent the rich mix of people within their business and externally.

Jon had yet to learn that the real value lies in the power of cognitive diversity: the differing ways people think. There would be little gain if people sitting around the board table looked different but sounded the same.

This was indeed Jon’s experience. Having previously felt on the periphery of his board, he grew his understanding of the business so as to fit seamlessly into its decision-making. Before long, this HR professional realised it had become too seamless for them all. There was a familiar pattern to their discussions – who led, who concurred – with insufficient fresh thinking or challenge to stimulate their strategic view. While a firm strategy could be indicative of a strong and capable board, Jon feared it had more to do with group-think that would limit the firm’s adaptability to future change.

He reflected on diversity initiatives he had led as HR Director, as well as board appointments and talent pipeline with the nominations committee. Too much of this had been HR-led, focused on activity rather than outcomes anchored in the business. Thus, initiatives had tended to adapt to the company as it was, rather than develop the company forwards. No wonder his initiatives had not been perceived to do much for the business! He needed to establish a future vision for their organisation which could enable the growth ambitions of the board – and perhaps aim higher still. He could use that organisational vision as rationale and North Star for initiatives to come.

Jon acknowledged that a bigger organisational change was on the cards than the board contemplated, and he would need to win their approval.

3. Establish broad support for your leadership view

In developing an enterprise viewpoint, Jon's touchpoints and relationships had grown. People became more inclined to share information, formally and informally. Now he considered how to share his proposal for organisational change. Not only must the board agree to sponsor it, but the change would affect them too and Jon anticipated some resistance. He remembered how **John Kotter encouraged leaders of change** to create a powerful guiding coalition of senior colleagues whose authority and support would boost a mandate to proceed. It should also reach more junior individuals with vital front-line experience and local credibility. Resistance would inform your view.

In accordance with good governance, Jon's board routinely discussed stakeholder interests when taking major strategic decisions. It made sense to Jon to do the same for his proposed organisational change: take account of key players and their concerns, incentives, motivations, etc.

It was the first time Jon was initiating strategic business change. While he had raised his leadership profile, it was not yet strong. Again, he received good if unusual advice. This was to also assess those with a stake in his own leadership – some of whom might not be immediately obvious. For example, high potentials within the HR function and employee opinion-formers. It would safeguard him to consider their perspectives, in order to increase positivity and minimise misperceptions which could damage him and his agenda. Jon made it a priority to strengthen his leadership standing before proposing disruptive change to the Board.

4. Pay attention to the work style and culture

Remember the *Survivor* contestants, who were rejected even when their skill was critically needed? Their dominating behaviours shattered rapport with their teams, rendering their position untenable. Jon knew nothing about the game show but was keen to communicate in such a way as to bring in people behind him.

As an HR expert, he understood that in some companies there was a disconnect between the top echelons and everyone else. This often led to differing priorities and work cultures, as well as organisational misalignment. It called to mind Peter Drucker's saying that culture eats strategy for breakfast. It meant that the levers for organisational change might not work

when you pulled them.

As Jon was deciding how to present his change initiative to his board and sell it across the organisation, he received one last bit of advice. It was that the more your communications and behaviours contrast with those of your colleagues, the greater the risk your message will not land well. The exception is if you were appointed to bring about change, or there is urgent imperative for change. In that case, non-conformity would model your mission of making a definitive break with the past.

Jon felt he should consider the followers upon whom his leadership depended, connecting with their mindset and behaviours to lead from rapport. With disruptive change in mind, he would carry hearts as well as minds to secure his mandate to lead them.

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