

John Adair Revisited

by Bob Larcher



When I started my career as a management development consultant back in 1986, the leadership model was John Adair's three circles (Action Centred Leadership); in fact I still have in my wallet my plasticized "Leader's Checklist" issued by the, then, Industrial Society. Since 1986 I have used many leadership models from Blake & Mouton, Tannenbaum & Schmidt, Hersey & Blanchard, Kouzes & Posner, Globe (as well as Guru's such as House, Bennis and Fiedler and probably a few I've missed out) and have now gone full circle back to a slightly adapted version of John Adair. The objective of this article is to explain why I feel that John Adair's model is as relevant to management today as it was 25 years ago.

(Ed's note – why not 'Google' if you want to know more about any of the management models listed above!)

John Adair's model

Adair identified 3 interlinked areas necessary for successful team leadership and "leadership actions" within each area:



- Achieve the task
 - Identify task and constraints
 - Establish priorities & check resources
 - Brief the team & check understanding
 - Monitor & summarise progress
 - Deliver on time

- Build the team
 - Involve and share commitment
 - Encourage ideas/actions
 - Develop suggestions
 - Reconcile conflict
 - Recognise success

- Develop the individuals
 - Clarify individual objectives
 - Assess skills and set targets
 - Listen & enthuse
 - Advise, assist, reassure, coach, etc.
 - Guide & train

John Adair's circles have always held a special place somewhere in the back of my mind, although over the years had slipped more and more into my deep memory as I was expounding the virtues of 'identifying follower readiness' or 'preferences for people or tasks' or the 'Practices of Exemplary Leadership'.

John Adair suddenly came back to the forefront of my thinking when I was running a leadership development programme for a corporate client a couple of years ago; the HR Director had just finished presenting the new company leadership model, 20 pages of PowerPoint with roles, responsibilities, values, deliverables, behaviours, challenges etc, and I could see the look of incomprehension creeping into the eyes of the participants. When the director had finished, and almost without thinking I went over to the white board and said something like "to make it simple: your job is



about getting things done with teams of people" while drawing Adair's 3 circles and then indicating in each circle some of the elements that were included in the programme: managing priorities, setting objectives, performance indicators in the Task circle, managing conflict, developing balanced teams, running meetings in the Team circle and appraisal interviews, motivation and personal development in the Individual circle. To my astonishment I found everyone copying almost every word and the paperboard went onto the wall to become a reference for the rest of the programme.

I was later asked to design a leadership seminar for senior aircraft accident investigators (those who are amongst the first to arrive at the scene of the crash

and organise the technical investigation) with the aim of helping them to deal with difficult and stressful situations; I decided to use Adair as the leadership model as this seemed appropriate to the situations that they have to face i.e. identifying the reasons for the accident (achieving the task), pulling together a disparate multicultural group of experts (building the team) and ensuring the psychological wellbeing of the investigators (developing the individuals). I built the seminar around a variety of outdoor based "barrels and planks" type exercises and debriefed each one using the Adair framework; the leadership actions in each area make the basis of excellent questions:

- **Did the leader establish priorities and check resources? Did he/she monitor and summarise progress?**
- **Were ideas and actions encouraged? Was conflict or differences of opinion reconciled?**
- **Did the leader clarify individual objectives? Did he/she listen and enthuse?**

Adair became firmly established as my "preferred" leadership model, at least in terms of clarifying or providing a framework in terms of what leaders should be doing, and it had crept (back) into most of my leadership work. My French colleagues were somewhat sceptical of its application. They saw it more for very task orientated, operational teams whereas I believed it could be applied to any team leader, leading any team; after all, all team leaders have to get things done with or through people regardless of their hierarchical level in the organisation. First-line team leaders have to get concrete things done, whereas the Managing Director has to get the business plan, or the new strategy done. Both, however, have teams of people that need to be managed and led, both as a team and as individuals.

I got the chance to prove my point when I was asked to provide a leadership framework for senior directors within a part of the French Civil-Service; I changed 'Task' to 'Operations' and included a circle that encompasses the original 3 circles that I call "Managing the Business Environment" including leadership actions such as, managing change, building relationships between teams and supporting & promoting one's team to the "outside world". During a brainstorming session with the senior directors I was able to put everything that they felt they should be doing into one of the four

circles. This they found perplexing and far too pragmatic. However, when I then audited them with regard to whether they were actually doing what they felt they should be doing it was easy from the framework to identify both their strengths and weaknesses. They became convinced of the value of the framework and it is now the core of their management competences model.

It's not only myself that believes that John Adair got it right (at least almost right) all those years ago, there is a new normative psychometric leadership questionnaire entitled the Integrated Leadership Questionnaire (ILM72) that is also based around Adair's work. The ILM72 measures, amongst other items:

Determination to deliver - The extent to which there is a single minded determination to achieve, both in the short and long term; i.e. achieving the task.

Focus on team working - The extent to which there is focus on and attention given to harnessing all the potential in an organisation so that problem solving and decision making can occur more efficiently and more effectively; i.e. building the team.

Focus on the individual - The extent to which there is focus on enhancing the capability, confidence and commitment of individuals to enable them to contribute to the organisation and to fulfil themselves; i.e. developing individuals.

Maybe all this goes to show that management and leadership hasn't really changed that much over the last 30 years or so but, unfortunately, the baby got thrown out with the bath water; our role is still to develop leaders capable of delivering on time through real cooperation while enabling individuals to develop. ■



References:

For information on John Adair: www.johnadair.co.uk For information on the ILM72: www.aqr.co.uk

Author's Notes

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Focus on team working.....