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SPECIAL LEADERSHIP FEATURE

Changing the Conversation Around Leadership

By Taushauna Mazzuca, P.Eng, Pillar Point Consulting



Our industry is as strong as our people. So, as leaders, how do we grow strong people in our organizations? This article will provide one foundational way to answer this question: development-first leadership.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE STRONG TALENT?

It's worth reminding ourselves what strength looks like in the engineering and construction industries:

- ▶ People have technical knowledge, usually gained through formal education, practical experience, and understanding of precedents from previous sites. This is the focus of educational institutions, continuing education, and on-the-job training.
- ▶ People have empirical knowledge, usually gained through persistent efforts to expose themselves to varied and increasingly challenging experiences. This is driven by the individual or company culture and leadership.
- ▶ People have soft skills, including communication (oral and written), persuasion, holistic thinking, persistence, creativity, and inquisitiveness.

People working in the construction industry should continue growing stronger in each of these three areas for the entirety of their careers. To grow stronger, the individual needs to be motivated to step outside of their comfort zone.

How we lead directly affects how we motivate people. These bullet points highlight the importance of asking, how do I show up at work—whether as a leader or individual—in a way that fosters an environment where people grow stronger, making our businesses stronger, and ultimately strengthening our industry?

LEADERSHIP IS IN A TIME OF TRANSITION, AND WE NEED A NEW APPROACH

The old style of leadership was my-way-or-the-highway. Many people working in construction were trained this way. One could argue this approach worked well—there was less nonsense, things were more straightforward, and we got a lot done. But what is also true is that the old way of leading does not work anymore. One reason is that people don't accept it; our culture no longer accepts it. Another reason is that many aspects of work have become more abstract, less straightforward, which means it is no longer safe to assume the leader knows

how to do things. Now we need teams who think critically, adapt, and generate ideas—qualities not supported by the do-it-because-I-said-so approach.

Consider the things that are less tangible/straightforward than they were fifteen years ago:

- ▶ How we communicate, internally or externally
- ▶ How we work as a team
- ▶ How we simplify job files and precedents
- ▶ How we show calculations (seldom on the back of a napkin)
- ▶ How we coordinate drawings (many iterations, vague finish lines)
- ▶ How we seal contracts (handshake vs. several pages long documents)
- ▶ How do we define a working day

We also see examples of things that are less tangible in society:

- ▶ What money is, when it is no longer tied to something physical? (i.e., gold)
- ▶ What does gender mean?
- ▶ What constitutes quality education for our children? (What do children really need to know for the future?)
- ▶ What falls under the category of art? (sometimes less about what it actually is and more about what it represents)

The point is that modern construction, even modern living, requires us to think more abstractly and conceptually. This gives us an opportunity, but it also requires us to lead differently. It means the automatic assumption that leaders know **how** to do things is no longer a good assumption. It means do-it-because-I-said-so no longer makes sense. To be a strong company—a strong industry—we need our teams to think critically, minimize fear, adapt, ask questions, and be creative. We need to lead in a way that motivates employees and colleagues to adapt to thinking this way.

Many companies are doing well at transitioning away from old styles of leadership and looking at other ways to motivate people. This may include creating

positive working environments, providing more context than in the past, and providing regular opportunities for feedback. The challenge arises when new ways of motivating people don't work. At that point, one of two things often happens: the leader goes back to the do-it-because-I-said-so style, or the leader doesn't want to upset the person, and the situation isn't properly addressed. This cycle is going on all around us—in workplaces, families, and schools. Leadership and motivating our people are in a time of transition.

A NEW KIND OF LEADERSHIP: DEVELOPMENT FIRST

Leadership of a new kind provides an alternative to old-school leadership and the transitional period we find ourselves in: development first (not results first). This approach focuses on developing ourselves and colleagues as a fundamental principle, knowing that results (which every company needs) will be a product of development. Development-first means that rather than a knee-jerk reaction to any situation or a fast dive into the next big project, we first step back and consider how the situation or work can be used to develop a new skill. Development-first means considering how we can help people, including ourselves, and develop the skills that the my-way-or-the-highway method won't grow. The choice to take a development-first approach means you and your colleagues will always have an anchor to return to when projects become demanding or stressful. This is because the opportunity to develop is always in your control.

Corporate coaching is an example of a development-first approach. Anyone who has had the privilege to participate in high-quality corporate coaching can attest to its value and that it has empowered them to accomplish things they never considered possible. The unfortunate reality is that this type of opportunity is typically reserved for people in high positions within a company, if at all.

But the good news is that anyone can take a development-first approach to leadership.

If you are a recognized leader within your organization, do not be afraid to ask someone you lead if they would like to develop, such as growing skills as team members. If they say yes, you can begin. If you are not recognized as a leader, apply it to yourself and/or find a mentor with a development-first approach.

By focusing on a development-first approach, you truly are leading and giving the person an opportunity to strengthen a skill. By asking them if they are interested, you put the responsibility on them. Indeed, a leader cannot force another person to do something. Regardless of their interest, as the leader, you will have peace of mind that you did what you could to help them. (There are, of course, situations where that person may not be a good fit for the role, the team, or the organization.)

Below are some everyday examples to highlight what it means to focus on development-first.

Development of Others

► ***A talkative colleague who doesn't get to the point.***

If you are the leader, the first step is to remind yourself that people can develop. The second step is to ask your colleague if they'd like to work on being more direct. If they say yes, work on it with them. For example, if you're in a meeting and they keep steering off point, you now have permission to redirect them. If they say no, there isn't much you can do to help them develop that skill. That said, you will leave the situation knowing you tried. You also have the opportunity to tell the person what impact their behavior has on team function, and that from time to time, you may cut them off so you can keep things on track.

► ***You or a colleague wants a new challenge.***

There aren't always openings for new positions internally. If you look at any situation as a possibility to develop, you can take any job and grow new skills. For example, if you regularly do conformance site visits, you could use them as opportunities to work on sales, connections/relationships, technical skills, curiosity, humor, or clear communication. The list is endless. And any development within these areas will make you stronger, and having you look at your job in a fresh way can give you energy like a new position would.

Development of Yourself

► ***When a colleague makes a mistake.***

As the leader, the first step before addressing the mistake is to remind yourself of what can be learned from the situation. This step, which can become automatic with practice, is using the mistake as an opportunity for development.

A development-first approach to the situation might involve the leader practicing the following:

- Asking questions
- Direct communication, giving feedback
- Showing empathy about what happened
- Being firm, i.e., “that was not okay.”
- Showing patience
- Providing perspective and managing emotional reactions

The situation may also uncover a need to reset the culture around how the company views and handles mistakes.

This is not just about fixing the mistake and the colleague learning something along the way. It’s also about the leader enhancing their own skills. And it’s about recognizing how your colleagues use their energy when they come to work. When people make a mistake, two things use up energy: the work required to fix the mistake and the burden one carries about it. The development-first approach lowers the burden, without the leader even doing anything, rather simply by their attitude when they show up to the meeting. We want the leader to encourage workers to figure out how to fix the mistake. People are better problem solvers when they are clear-headed enough to evaluate the problem and come up with good solutions. A development-first approach allows this to happen.

CONCLUSION

Our industry is as strong as our people. Today’s environment presents a need and an opportunity to change how we lead, which can expand how far and how fast our talent can grow. This is good for our companies and our industry.

The first step for a leader to apply a development-first leadership style is to make the commitment to do it—to put the development of our teams and those we lead first. From my experience, this commitment to do it, to remember to do it, and to actually do it until it becomes a habit, is where the work lies. Consider a time when you’ve implemented a new process or software. It is always the human habit that is hardest to change.

This commitment to a development-first style of leadership is leadership of a new kind. It isn’t my-way-or-the-highway or avoiding confrontations that might upset someone. Instead, it’s facing problems head-on, with yourself or with someone you lead, and considering what can grow. It’s how we grow strong talent in ourselves and others. Remember, leadership is earned, not given. To learn more, please visit www.pillar-point.ca. ▲



Taushauna is a Professional Engineer with 18 years of experience in heavy civil construction. Her career spans from working “in the trenches” in Project Management and Design to operating at the executive

level as a senior leader and stakeholder.

She believes that industries and organizations are only as strong as their people, and leadership plays a central role in shaping this strength. Defining what leadership truly means—making it simple, actionable, and accessible—and choosing to step into it are essential for long-term success. These principles directly affect the growth, resilience, and well-being of both individuals and organizations. Taushauna advocates for leadership that combines humanity with firmness to create environments where people and businesses can thrive.

She sees leadership as a boundless opportunity to address today’s challenges, including employee engagement, retention, work-life pressures, and onboarding the next generation. Through her consulting practice, she partners with individuals and organizations who want to invest in themselves and their people.

Learn more at www.pillar-point.ca or connect at taushauna@pillar-point.ca.