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Understanding how leaders set the tone for Good Days at Work

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— Can your managers create a culture of wellbeing?

If you're like most of us, you'll have worked for a fair few managers during your career. You've probably greatly enjoyed working for some of them – those inspirational leaders who've given you just the right amount of rope. Some of the others, who've maybe been a bit too hands-on for your tastes, or who you've found a little too determined to keep their 'eyes on the prize' – well, perhaps they coincided with some more challenging times in your personal journey.

Whatever your own experiences, every one of us has learned at least something from our managers: **that our relationship with them goes a long way to influencing how much we enjoy our work.**

This isn't news. Nobody is holding the front page for this revelation. And yet for some reason, when we think about the wellbeing of our workforces, other than cascading briefing packs to 'roll out' the latest scheme, we often neglect the fundamental importance of managers in making our wellbeing strategies stick.

To be clear, this isn't a call to mark out 'good' or 'bad' managers. Instead, it's a plea to give managers more thought and more support. To not treat them simply as identical fractions of the whole or limit their importance to that of a comms channel, but to **ensure they're equipped with the right balance of skills, enabling as many people in their charge as possible to benefit from positive wellbeing** and the fulfilling experience of more Good Days at Work.

Who are we?

Robertson Cooper uses powerful science and research to unlock the energy and productivity of organisations and generate more Good Days at Work. We understand **the critical role of line managers** in nurturing strong employee engagement and wellbeing; that's why we created our leadership profiling tool, **Leadership Impact**.

Over the years, we've profiled more than 200,000 UK leaders, and now our experts are analysing the patterns within that unique data resource to provide organisations with insightful, pioneering guidance for more Good Days at Work.

What is a *Good Day at Work*?

Intuitively, we all know what it feels like to come home from a Good Day at Work. It's a sensation of contentment and accomplishment that we'd love to bottle. **But what is it that informs that feeling?**

From extensive research conducted by Robertson Cooper, we know there are FOUR key factors at play:



There's no single, simple answer to creating the conditions where employees can routinely experience all four factors. **But one significant part of the puzzle is how the style of our managers impacts the workplace culture.**

How managers make a *difference*.

Robertson Cooper's **Leadership Impact** tool has identified four natural leadership styles that fall into two primary motivations of **challenge** and **support**:

Challenge Led

Pace-driven

The pace-driven leader is someone who thrives in a fast-moving environment. They tend to be flexible in responding, flourish in change and are commonly generating new ideas and solutions.

Results-driven

The results-driven leader is someone who focuses on objective results and goals, usually with high standards. They tend to follow projects through to completion and deliver on their goals.

Support Led

Co-operative

The co-operative-driven leader naturally focuses on getting their team working together, ensuring there is collaboration, and the team all have a voice.

Confident

The confident-driven leader naturally has a strong belief in the capabilities of their team. They focus on strengths and encourage ongoing development.

The behaviours that managers exhibit can make or break the job satisfaction and performance levels of their teams. Everyone needs a healthy mix of challenge and support from their managers and workplaces to perform at their best. Every individual is different, of course, so there's no universal magic potion for combining the two requirements at all times.

However, Robertson Cooper's **Leadership Impact** psychometric assessment tool allows managers to discover their personal mix of styles and better understand their own strengths and weaknesses. This awareness is particularly helpful at times of high pressure, when we all have a tendency to revert to our natural styles.

For example, when under pressure:

- **Pace-driven** managers get even faster;
- **Results-driven** managers prioritise results at any cost;
- **Cooperative** managers seek more opinions;
- **Confidence** managers assume others will just get on with it

Armed with this self-knowledge, managers are better placed to consider the balance they offer their teams and improve the potential for more challenging, supportive Good Days at Work amongst them. Without it, there are two major risks of imbalanced leadership styles: **challenged-led managers are more likely to push people into burnout, while support-led managers can create rust-out.**

The former is more widely known – employees can't get through their work, the stress gets too much and decision-making, relationships and positivity all start to suffer – but the latter, when work is made dull, too easy and without purpose, can be equally destructive. Wellbeing isn't just about not feeling stressed, it's about having meaning in the day too, and managers have a vital role to play in providing the right blend to sustain their teams appropriately.

For a Good Day at Work, we need a healthy dose of positive pressure with a mixture of challenge and support.

Help your managers get the balance right.

Managers and leaders set the tone for culture within an organisation. It takes vision, investment, appropriate leadership training and an understanding of how managers fit into your overall wellbeing strategy to set that tone.

Paying attention to the mix and diversity of personalities within a leadership team is a powerful way to ensure your culture establishes a healthy balance of challenge and support. That's important, because maintaining an equilibrium between those two needs goes a long way towards boosting the positive wellbeing of your employees.

Helping people experience more Good Days at Work isn't simply an altruistic gesture – it makes good business sense too. Robertson Cooper's Leadership Impact tool can be used as a standalone assessment or as part of an aligned training programme for managers.

If you're interested in finding out how to unlock the creativity and productivity of your organisation, get in touch with us: hi@robertsoncooper.com



Revealed:

**3 thought-provoking
takeaways from our unique
leadership dataset...**

Revealed: 3 thought-provoking takeaways from our unique leadership dataset

We've crunched the data from **over 200,000** completed Leadership Impact psychometric assessments and found some fascinating food for thought. Here, we reveal three of our most thought-provoking findings, beginning with that burning question of *gender*.

1 Men or women: who *bosses* the Good Day at Work?

Over the last decade, there's been a growing collection of coverage proclaiming women as better managers than men. Is that simply anecdotal, 'politically correct' reporting or is there any factual basis for the headlines?

A large, global study by Gallup found that not only are female leaders more engaged than their male counterparts, but also that their direct reports are more engaged too. Employees with female managers are more likely to be encouraged in their development, get feedback on their progress, and receive recognition for their efforts, all of which give workers a sense of meaningful motivation that helps create Good Days at Work. There appears to be evidence to back up the theory, then. But why should this be? What are the specific leadership

traits making women superior bosses to men?

Delving into our own data, we find that there's some difference between the genders in their natural styles, with women more likely to have a balanced leadership style – a mix of challenge-led and support-led as their primary and secondary styles. But the discrepancy is hardly headline-grabbing – **79% of women managers have a balanced style against 74% of men**. While a balanced style is a good indicator of a leader able to create positive wellbeing within her or his team the main conclusion to be drawn here seems favourable news for both sexes, as the vast majority of managers are equipped with a helpful balance of styles.



Women are more likely to have a leadership style with a balance of **challenge** and **support**.

So what's going on? By digging a little deeper into our extensive bank of data, we believe we've found an answer. We know that the five major personality traits – openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism – influence behaviour. By taking a closer look at one of those traits – conscientiousness – we discover some intriguing insights.

Conscientiousness is generally acknowledged as a good thing for the work performance of all employees, and there's plenty of research showing how successful managers tend to demonstrate that particular trait. A paper

co-authored by our co-founder, Prof. Ivan Robertson, shows how certain facets of managerial conscientiousness impact the wellbeing of direct reports; namely that aspects of the trait which correlate with a strong sense of duty are likely to have a positive effect, while those facets linked to striving for achievement and feeling highly competent may be less helpful. As the paper states: *"When leaders' sense of competence is high, subordinates experience less control and poorer relationships with their managers... [Conversely], employees with more dutiful leaders report a healthier work-life balance."*

Female bosses, especially older female bosses, really are likely to create more Good Days at Work than men.

What has that got to do with gender? Not much. Until our new analysis, utilising more than 200,000 submissions to our **iResilience** personality tool, uncovered a striking finding: **women are more likely than men to have a mix of the conscientiousness facets that impact wellbeing positively.**

To some observers, this may come across as a hindrance to leadership. That's why we think female managers may sometimes be getting misjudged as less effective when, in reality, they're enabling more of their team to experience better wellbeing and more Good Days at Work, enhancing group creativity and productivity to the overall benefit of the organisation.

And the discrepancy is greater still if we add age into the equation. **Older women, those in the 55 to 64 age range, possess an even better mix of these wellbeing-building elements of personality, whereas younger men, aged 25 to 29, tend to have the lowest proportion of such facets.** In fact, comparing the two groups presents quite a striking difference that, as managers, may have a sizeable influence over their natural potential to deliver wellbeing for their teams. All of which, we believe, goes some way towards explaining exactly why there are so many column inches telling us that women make better managers than men – **for their teams, female bosses, especially older female bosses, really are likely to create more Good Days at Work than men.**

55-64

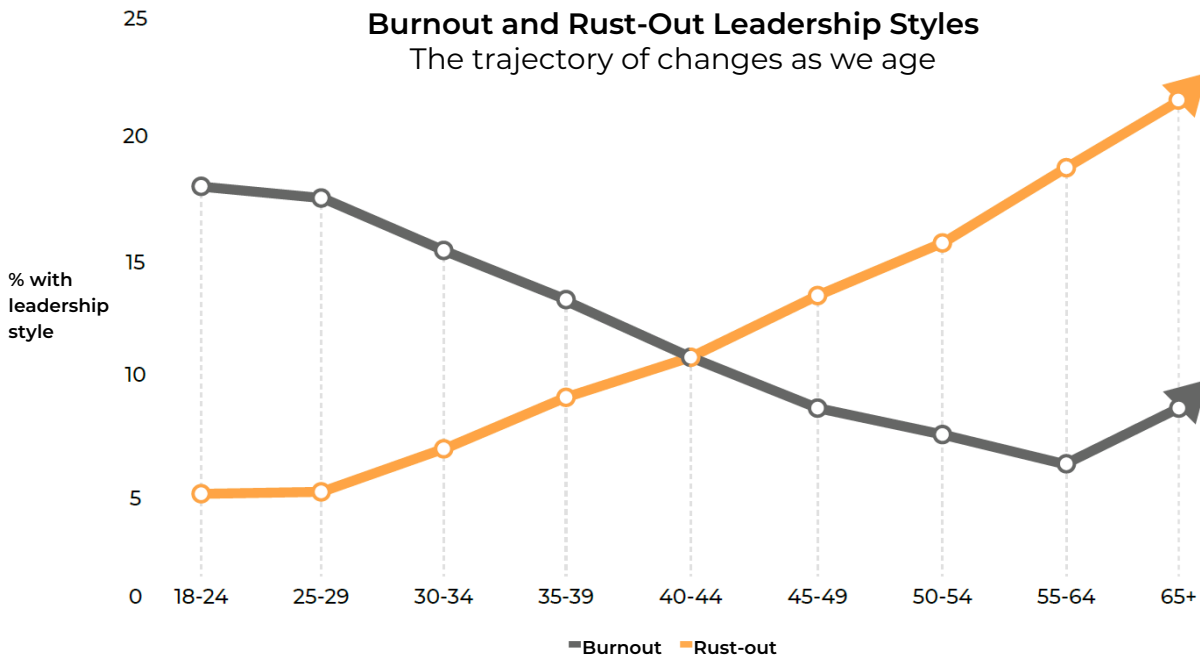
Older women possess a better mix of the wellbeing-building elements of personality

25-29

Younger men tend to have the lowest proportion of wellbeing-building personality facets

2 Age is more than just a *number*.

As the graph below makes plain, there's a relatively clear and simple story for the difference in leadership style by age:



Younger managers are more likely to have a challenge led style, older managers are more likely to have a support led style.

A much higher percentage of young managers are challenge-led by nature whereas a much higher proportion of older managers are support-led by nature. **The tricky question is: why?**

There are several theories. One is that young leaders are so determined to succeed that they heap pressure on not only themselves but everyone in their sphere of influence too. Then, as they grow older and gain experience, they relax a bit, build up some resilience and have less need for a baldly challenge-led approach.

Or perhaps it's the challenge-led 'go-getters' who are promoted to managerial positions first, skewing the figures for their age range until their more cooperative and support-led peers eventually reach the next rung of the ladder and add to the management gene pool? Or do those taking their first steps as leaders in their twenties simply lack the life skills to be empathetic, supportive managers of people?

Another school of thought is that managers are a product of their generational experiences and values, reinforcing the view of some that many Millennials are nakedly ambitious to the exclusion of anything else.

This is a generation that is better educated, more driven to achieve and in possession of more technological tools to aid success than any group that has gone before them. Does this spill out into the way they interact at work? And conversely, have older managers donned the comfy slippers and quietly given up on driving hard for results in favour of an easy drift towards retirement?

Whatever the reasons, the trajectory is obvious and the message to those in a position to provide management development or maintain the wellbeing of their employees should be obvious too: we need to support all managers appropriately and as individuals. The data suggests there's little value in assembling a group of 60-year-old managers for a session on how to be supportive to their teams, for example, but that same session might benefit the twenty-something appointees just starting their leadership journeys.

Once again though, it's worth pointing out the underlying message here, that whatever their age or gender, the vast majority of leaders have balanced leadership styles. That's a really positive story for the wellbeing potential of UK organisations.

3 Raising the *spectre* of sector.

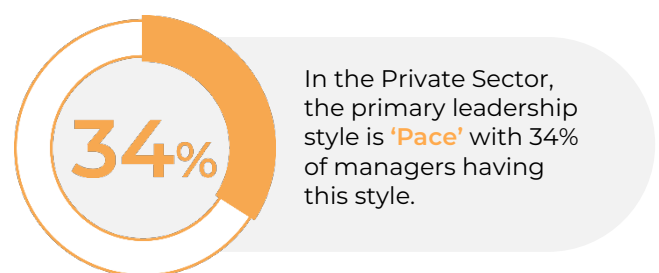
It's a subject that always seems to create controversy: **are the public and private sectors run differently?** And is one approach more effective than the other? Thanks to the data we've amassed from the Robertson Cooper **Leadership Impact** profiling tool, we can shine a light on the leadership styles for each sector.

And there's a serious point to this analysis too, because the cultural impact of a high concentration of a particular style can be significant. If any one sector has a disproportionate number of challenge-led leaders, then the culture itself could be set for burnout. Similarly, a high concentration of support-led leaders may indicate increased potential for cultural rust-out. Both scenarios have all sorts of ramifications for recruitment, training, employee wellbeing and more.

So, is there a difference between public and private sector leadership? In short, yes. But understanding precisely why that's the case is still up for grabs. The primary leadership style in the private sector is pace-driven, a form of challenge-led style, with 34% of UK managers profiled employing it. By contrast, in the public sector, 49% of managers adopt a primarily cooperative, support-led leadership style.

Knowing this helps all of us ask some big questions. Do public sector bodies, and big, hierarchical organisations in general, need a more cooperative, supportive approach in order to successfully navigate the day-to-day complexities they face? Do managers who are challenge-led leave, or never join, the public sector, and if so, what impact does this have on the way our public bodies operate?

Conversely, would issues such as corporate responsibility, employee burnout and longer-term, integrated thinking improve if private businesses slowed down a little and worked together more cooperatively? Or is the status quo exactly right for how each sector works best? The debate will doubtless run and run.



Whatever your manager mix, create more Good Days at Work...

Every style has value for our organisations, but what if too much of a good thing turns out to be a bad thing? What would a public institution look like with more pace-driven and results-oriented management? How might young managers soar if they were equipped to be as supportive as they are up for a challenge – and how might older managers prolong their success if they kept the spark for a good challenge alive?

Is a leadership style monoculture holding the wellbeing of your workforce back? Are you missing out on the big boosts in creativity and productivity that more Good Days at Work provide?

We can help...

To connect with our well-balanced team of skilled Business Psychologists, email hi@robertsconcooper.com