

# JOHN ADAIR: ACTION-CENTRED LEADERSHIP.

Thinker 032

## » INTRODUCTION



John Adair (b.1934), best-known for his three-circle model of Action-Centred Leadership, is widely regarded as the UK's foremost authority on leadership and leadership development in organisations. He has written over 40 books and more than a million managers have taken his Action-Centred Leadership programmes.

Adair (along with the late Warren Bennis) firmly believes that leadership can be taught, that it does not depend on a person's traits and that it is a transferable skill. Adair's ideas remain popular because they are practical and relevant to managers irrespective of working environment, and his works have been instrumental in overturning the 'Great Man' theories of leadership.

Adair is prominent for drawing a clear distinction between leadership and management: the latter, he contends, is rooted in mechanics, control and systems. He contrasts this with his teaching method, Action-Centred Leadership that has proved to be an enduring approach defining leadership in terms of three overlapping and interdependent circles: Task, Team and Individual. John Adair is less well-known for his other ideas on the practical aspects of leadership such as decision-making and personal effectiveness, although many of these ideas were ahead of their time and are now widely taught and applied.

## » LIFE AND CAREER

Adair's early career was varied and colourful and undoubtedly formed the basis for his views on leadership. After joining the Scots Guards he became the only national serviceman to serve in the Arab Legion, where he was adjutant in a Bedouin regiment. Before going to university he qualified as a deckhand and worked on an Icelandic trawler. He also worked as an orderly in a hospital operating theatre. After studying at Cambridge University he became senior lecturer in Military History, and Leadership Training Adviser at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. He went on to become the Director of Studies at St George's House in Windsor Castle, and two years later was appointed Assistant Director of the Industrial Society, where he *pioneered Action-Centred Leadership*. In 1979 John Adair became the world's first professor in Leadership Studies at the University of Surrey. Adair is currently an Emeritus Fellow of the Windsor Leadership Trust. Since 2006, he has been Honorary Professor of Leadership at the China Executive Leadership Academy in Pudong and in 2009 he was appointed Chair of Leadership Studies United Nations System Staff College in Turin.

A prolific thinker, Adair's academic accolades include Master of Letters from Oxford University, and

a Doctorate of Philosophy from King's College, London. The prestigious title of Honorary Professor has been bestowed upon him by the People's Republic of China for his outstanding contribution and research in the field of leadership.

## » KEY THEORIES

### Action-centred leadership

This simple and practical model is figuratively based on three overlapping circles. These represent the task, the team and the individual. The model seems to endure well, probably because it is the fundamental model for describing what leaders have to do, the actions they must take whatever their working environment, in order to be effective:

1. Achieve the task
2. Build and maintain the team
3. Develop the individual

(See Related model, Adair's Action Centred Leadership)

Task, team and individual: Adair's concept asserts that the three needs of task, team and individual are the watchwords of leadership, as people expect their leaders to help them achieve the common task, build the synergy of teamwork, and respond to individuals' needs.

- › The **task** needs work groups or organisations to come into effect because one person alone cannot accomplish it.
- › The **team** needs constant promotion and retention of group cohesiveness to ensure that it functions efficiently. The team functions on the 'united we stand, divided we fall' principle.
- › The **individual's needs** are the physical ones (salary) and the psychological ones of recognition; sense of purpose and achievement; status; and the need to give and receive from others in a work environment.

For Adair, the task, team and individual needs overlap as follows:

- › **Achieving the task** builds the team and satisfies the individuals
- › **If the team needs are not met** - if the team lacks cohesiveness - then performance of the task is impaired and individual satisfaction is reduced
- › **If individual needs are not met** the team will lack cohesiveness and performance of the task will be impaired

Adair's view is that leadership exists at three different levels:

- › **Team leadership** of teams of 5 to 20 people
- › **Operational leadership**, where a number of team leaders report to one leader
- › **Strategic leadership** of a whole business or organisation, with overall accountability for all levels of leadership

At whatever level leadership is being exercised, Adair's model takes the view that task, team and individual needs must be constantly considered.

The strengths of the concept are that it is timeless and is independent of situation or organisational culture. A further strength of the concept is that it can help a leader to identify where he or she may be losing touch with the real needs of the group or situation.

Leadership Functions: in order to fulfil the three aspects of leadership (task, team and individual) and achieve success, Adair believes that there are eight functions that must be performed and developed by the leader:

1. **Defining the task:** Individuals and teams need to have the task distilled into a clear objective that is SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time Constrained).
2. **Planning:** Planning requires a search for alternatives and this is best done with others in an open-minded, positive and creative way. Contingencies should be planned for and plans should be tested.
3. **Briefing:** Team briefing is viewed as a basic leadership function that is essential in order to create the right atmosphere, promote teamwork, and motivate each individual.
4. **Controlling:** Adair wrote in *The Skills of Leadership* that excellent leaders get maximum results with the minimum of resources. To achieve this leaders need self-control, good control systems in place and effective delegation and monitoring skills.
5. **Evaluating:** Leaders need to be good at assessing consequences, evaluating team performance, appraising and training individuals, and judging people.
6. **Motivating:** Adair distinguishes six principles for motivating others in his book *Effective motivation*: be motivated yourself; select people who are highly motivated; set realistic and challenging targets; remember that progress motivates; provide fair rewards; and give recognition.
7. **Organising:** Good leaders have to be able to organise themselves, their team and the organisation (including structures and processes). Leading change requires a clear purpose and effective organisation to achieve results.
8. **Setting an example:** Leaders need to set an example both to individuals and to the team as a whole. Since a bad example is noticed more than a good one, setting a good example is something that must be worked at constantly.

Adair considers that these leadership functions need to be developed and honed to constantly improve the leader's ability.

## Motivating people

In many ways, Adair's ideas in the area of motivating people are in line with those of the classic motivational theorists, such as Maslow, McGregor and Herzberg.

**The 50:50 Rule:** just as the Pareto principle (or 80:20 rule) is the ratio of the vital few and the trivial many, the Adair 50:50 rule (from his book *Effective motivation*) states that: '50% of motivation comes from within a person, and 50% from his or her environment, especially from the leadership encountered therein'.

Adair's view is that people are motivated by a complex and varied number of different factors. So, for example, the 'carrot and stick' approach is not dismissed by Adair, but is seen, rather, as one of the stimulus-response approaches that can be one factor among many others in motivating or influencing people's actions. For Adair, an individual's strength of motivation is affected by the expectations of outcomes from certain actions, but it is also strengthened by other factors such as the individual's preferred outcome (as demonstrated by Victor Vroom in the 1960s); conditions in the working environment; and the individual's own perceptions and fears.

**Adair's Eight Rules in Motivating People:** Adair proposes that understanding what motivates individuals to act is fundamental to engaging their interest and focusing their efforts. The will that leads to action is governed by motives, and motives are inner needs or desires that can be conscious, semi-conscious or unconscious. In

The John Adair handbook of management and leadership the point is made that 'motives can also be mixed, with several clustered around a primary motive'.

Adair emphasises the importance of a motivating environment and a motivated individual. The third, crucial factor is the role of the leader who must, he believes, be completely self-motivated. In Effective motivation, eight basic rules are outlined to guide leaders in motivating people to act:

1. Be motivated yourself
2. Select people who are highly motivated
3. Treat each person as an individual
4. Set realistic and challenging targets
5. Remember that progress motivates
6. Create a motivating environment
7. Provide fair rewards
8. Give recognition

### Developing a personal sense of time

Adair's view of time management accords closely with Peter Drucker's, in that he argues for the prior need to manage time in order to manage anything else. Adair was one of the first management thinkers to emphasise the critical importance of time management and its central role in focusing action and helping leaders to achieve goals. For Adair, time management is not simply about being organised or efficient, or completing certain tasks: it is about managing time with a focus on achievement. Time management should be goal-driven and results-oriented.

Success in time management should be measured by the quantity of productive work achieved, and the quality of both the work and the person's private life. Ten principles of time management given in *How to manage your time* are:

1. Develop a personal sense of time
2. Identify long-term goals
3. Make medium-term plans
4. Plan the day
5. Make the best use of your best time
6. Organise office work
7. Manage meetings
8. Delegate effectively
9. Make use of committed time
10. Manage your health

Of these ten principles, developing a personal sense of time, and increasing personal effectiveness is central to Adair, again highlighting his emphasis on individual characteristics.



## IN PERSPECTIVE

It is perhaps unsurprising that there has been something of a backlash against Adair's thinking, given the pace and scale of changes in the work environment during the last twenty years. Adair's ideas were very new when they first appeared, and for many people their main value lay in the successful challenge they offered to the then-dominant Great Man theories. These theories, because they insisted that leaders were born and not made, completely undermined the possibility of training or developing people in leadership skills. Since Adair's views have been successfully established, however, he has become more of a target, with critics claiming that his approach (developed in the 1960s) has now itself become outdated.

One major criticism of *Action-Centred Leadership* is that it takes little account of the flat structures that are now generally advocated as the best organisational form. Action-Centred Leadership is also criticised for being too 'authoritarian', applicable in a rigid, formal, military-type environment, but less relevant to the modern workplace where the leadership emphasis is on leading change, empowering, enabling, managing knowledge and fostering innovation.

Other criticisms levelled at Adair's approach include the view that his approaches are too simple, are not academically rigorous and lack real substance in that he is merely stating the obvious, common sense view. For many others, however, it is exactly this practical simplicity and clarity about what a leader should do that is so valuable - and timeless. For this reason many organisations and business schools worldwide continue teaching the Adair approach to developing leadership. For over 40 years his overlapping, three-circle model of *Action-Centred Leadership* has been integrated into company cultures and individual's leadership styles, and is an established hallmark of management training for many organisations.

The continued relevance of Adair's concepts for organisations is reinforced by the re-publication of some of his key works: *Leadership and motivation* (2006), which was originally published in 1990 as *Understanding motivation*; and *The art of creative thinking* (2007) first published in 1990. In addition, *Leadership for innovation* (2007) is a revision of his original work, *The challenge of innovation* which was again first published in 1990. Several more books have followed, strongly indicating the appetite for and the continued influence and importance of his ideas for inspiring leaders today.



## KEY WORKS BY ADAIR

The editions cited here are those held in, and available for loan to members from, the [CMI Library](#). These may not always be the first edition.

### **Action centred leadership**

London: McGrawHill, 1984

### **The skills of leadership**

Aldershot: Gower, 1984

### **Effective motivation**

Guildford: Talbot Adair Press, 1987

### **Effective leadership**

London: Pan, 1988

### **The action-centred leader**

London: Industrial Society, 1988

### **Great leaders**

Guildford: Talbot Adair Press, 1989

### **How to manage your time**

Guildford: Talbot Adair Press, 1990

### **The John Adair handbook of management and leadership**, Neil Thomas ed

London: Thorogood, 1998

### **How to grow leaders: the seven key principles of effective leadership development**

London: Kogan Page, 2005

An e-book summary of this title is also available

## **Leadership and motivation: the fifty-fifty rule and eight key principles of motivating others**

London: Kogan Page, 2006

(Originally published as Understanding motivation by Talbot Adair Press, 1990)

## **Effective leadership development**

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development: London, 2006

## **The art of creative thinking: how to develop your powers of innovation and creativity**

London: Kogan Page, 2007 (Originally published by Talbot Adair Press, 1990)

## **Leadership for innovation: how to organise team creativity and harvest ideas**

London: Kogan Page, 2007, rev. ed.

(Originally published as The challenge of innovation by Talbot Adair Press, 1990)

## **Develop your leadership skills**

London: Kogan Page, 2007

This book is also available as an e-book

## **Decision making and problem solving strategies**

London: Kogan Page, 2010

This book is also available as an e-book

## **Strategic leadership: How to think and plan strategically and provide direction**

London: Kogan Page, 2010

This book is also available as an e-book

## **RELATED MODELS**

Adair's Action Centred Leadership

## **RELATED THINKERS**

Warren Bennis: leadership guru (039)

Peter Drucker: The Father of post-war management (017)

Frederick Herzberg: the hygiene motivation theory (01)

Abraham Maslow: the hierarchy of needs (09)

Douglas McGregor: theory X and theory Y (026)

## **INTERNET RESOURCES**

John Adair- Leadership and Management

<http://www.johnadair.co.uk/>

Provides a listing of all Adair's publications



## **MORE INFORMATION**

**e** [enquiries@managers.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@managers.org.uk)

**t** +44 (01536) 204222

**w** [www.managers.org.uk](http://www.managers.org.uk)

**p** Chartered Management Institute  
Management House, Cottingham Rd, Corby, Northants, NN17 1TT

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Action Centered Leadership (ACL) makes leadership learnable using the three levels of leadership, the three circle model and eight leadership functions. Action Centered Leadership (ACL) focuses on what leaders and managers need to do to be more efficient. There three fundamental components to management and leadership that can be learned. This article describes Action Centered Leadership (ACL) by John Adair in a practical way.