

The neuroscience of marketing leadership

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In order to drive their marketing plans within the organisation, senior marketers must know how to gain internal relevance and influence. **Ian Rheeder** discusses his research into the TEC Leadership Model.

Through leadership, businesses either advance or deteriorate. And because the marketing plan should lead the business plan, the senior marketer is at the epicentre of organisational leadership. But knowing how to sell and implement the marketing plan – both inside and outside the boardroom – requires advanced leadership skills.

The TEC Leadership Model – based on three key pillars of Trust, Engagement and Competence – provides an effective tool to guide marketing executives in developing and implementing these internal leadership strategies.

Background

Neuroscience tells us that people are primarily a social species, driven by primeval caveman reflexes developed over tens of thousands of years. In the boardroom, because of these associated evolutionary reflexes, we are not nearly as rational as we think we are and, therefore, at the crux of leadership is the ability to adapt our style to these ancient idiosyncrasies.

One such idiosyncrasy, for example, is that humans have an unconscious repulsion to being persuaded and that nobody likes being ‘sold to’. Fortunately, neuroscience also shows us that people are strongly motivated by the emotional engagement of trustworthy relationships.

How, then, do we persuade and get cooperation from our work colleagues, without forcing them to comply with our marketing plan? The following explains how marketing leaders, using the three TEC domains of trust, engagement and competence, can be taken more seriously in the work environment.

Trust (Reputational Capital)

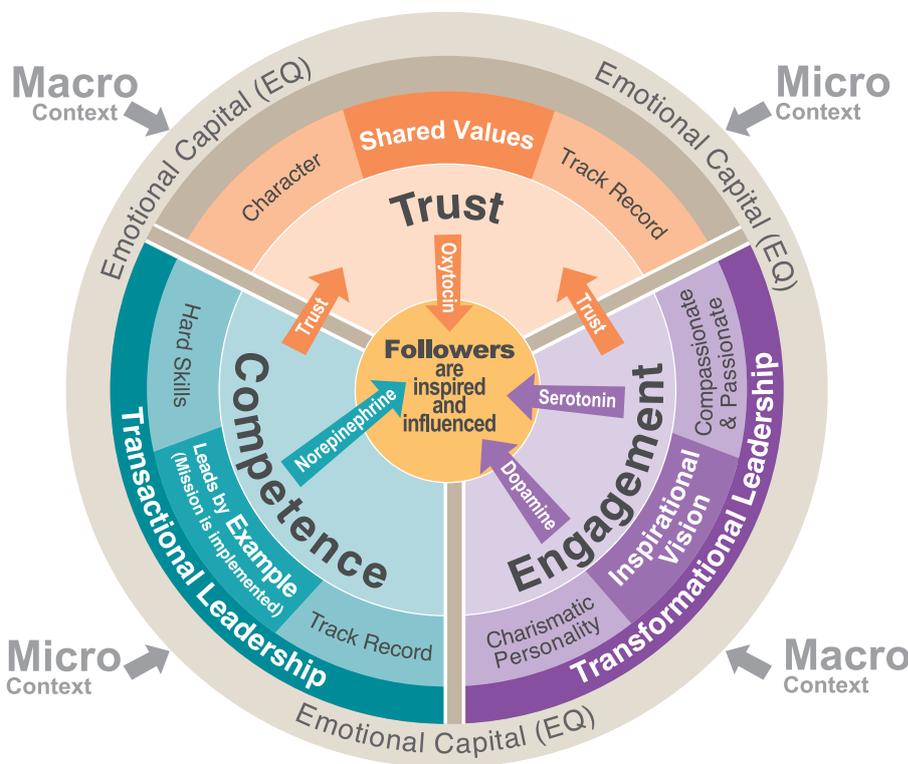
If marketers can’t hold a conversation with their CEO, are at a loss for words when asked to quantify their return on marketing investment, or are socially incompetent with the COO, they will rapidly lose reputational capital among their peers in the C-suite.

At a neurobiological level, here’s what is really going on. Trust is the overarching prerequisite of all relationships with colleagues and, at a neurobiological level, trust produces the bonding hormone called oxytocin.

Studying the TEC Leadership diagram (below), it's interesting to note that both emotional **engagement** and **competence** fuel the **trust** segment too. Because of our ancient biological circuitry we are inherently attuned to seeking trust, which is the central social lubricant – the basic need of our ‘dog’ brain – to maintain strong relationships. So trust is the platform, the binding force, between a marketer and all stakeholders, whether internal or external to the organisation.

TEC Leadership Model:

Leadership Capital = Trust (reputational capital) + **Engagement** (relational capital) + **Competence** (managerial capital)



TEC Leadership Model © Ian Rheeder 2012

Neuroeconomist Paul Zak’s studies show that people are motivated by returning favours, just as much as by raw self-interest. This goes back to the reality that we’re foremost social creatures and, when trust is displayed, we are hardwired to return the favour. Thus, if marketers can engage with their colleagues at this emotional-oxytocin level, the interest in the marketer’s message (and plan) escalates. So too does the followers’ need to reciprocate the favour, and do what is asked of them.

It’s important to understand that, no matter how great the marketer’s vision, if management colleagues and employees don’t first buy-in to the marketing leader, they will not be inclined to walk the road to his vision. Professor of psychology, Robert Plutchik, singled out **trust** as one

of the eight basic emotions we feel, and that the opposite emotion of trust is **disgust**. The opposite of a high-trust marketer therefore should be described as a **high-disgust** marketer – and nobody’s likely to want to follow that person’s vision or plan!

Because of another primary survival need – for **clarity** – we either box people as ‘I **trust** you’ or ‘I have **disgust** for you’. There is no lukewarm state of indifference. In other words, if there is no evidence of trust, the feeling of disgust sets in. Nature’s survival mechanism had just programmed us this way. This is why it’s so important for marketers to go out on a limb and create the physical evidence that they actually are on the side of their group; and that they genuinely do share a strong value congruence with their colleagues in the C-suite.

Ideally, this is why marketers need a track record of integrity and hard results before they enter into a senior position. Because where there is no trust in the marketer, performance-destroying suspicion – a disconnect – is felt across all levels of the organisation.

Engagement (relational capital, typical of the transformational leadership style)

Astute marketers set emotionally engaging goals that evoke a response in the organisation. To do so, they clearly communicate the step-by-step plan and engage using a shared vision, mission and values.

Here’s how **engaging** leaders put their group onto a natural high. Our ascending monoamine system (AMS) is made up of three separate systems: serotonin (a feel-good neurotransmitter); norepinephrine (arousal neurotransmitter/hormone) and dopamine (reward-motivation neurotransmitter). Interestingly, snorting cocaine also leads to an increase in serotonergic, noradrenergic (adrenaline), and dopaminergic neurotransmissions!

The AMS gives us an insight into what a great leader can trigger in a follower. Cocaine – like a great marketing leader – increases our alertness and feelings of euphoria, well-being, energy, motor activity and competence. As a result, followers – now with the AMS pumping out these three neurotransmitters – become super-conscious and engaged at implementing the marketing plan.

By contrast, where there is no emotional bond, disengagement (mind wandering) creeps in. The result is plummeting productivity, learning and creativity.

In an effort to engage their followers, manipulative leaders (usually individuals without competencies or trust) unfortunately over-deliver on a charismatic style. But like it or not, transformational leadership is a placebo and many top leaders, in spite of their excellent credentials and competencies, cannot get support today without the placebo of a great emotional speech.

That may seem ridiculous, but, for better or worse, marketers must appreciate how the hype of inspirational transformational leadership works. They then need to emotionally engage their own target audience as a way of effectively communicating and selling their marketing plan.

The next step is to take this transformational hype, and bolster it with the marketer's hard competencies.

Competence (managerial capital, typical of a transactional leadership style)

Competent marketers should have a dozen marketing metrics at their fingertips. They must know how to defend their marketing spend, be great storytellers at company gatherings, and confidently lead the organisation during strategy facilitation sessions. In addition, they must know when to reject weak creative ideas and hold the advertising agency accountable. Finally, they need to be able to work closely with the CFO to get the marketing strategy rubberstamped.

In the book *The Psychology of Leadership (2005)*, author Tom Tyler warns that leadership should not only be about “motivating” the group, but should also “set goals for the group (vision)” and “structure the organisation so that it can effectively attain those goals (implementation).”

Hence, it is action that counts the most and it's important to remind ourselves of management guru Peter Drucker's quote: “Leadership is all about results”. This doesn't mean the leader should use fear to motivate, rather, she should keep followers appropriately challenged and productive. The marketing leader's observed competence – their **expert power** – excitedly keeps followers on their toes. Here the leader **influences** more than **inspires**. Steve Jobs was rude and rough, but his observable competence and vision built great trust.

Leadership and management are flipsides of the same coin. Remember that transformational leaders keeps their followers' ‘chins-up’ – excited about the shared vision; and a transactional manager keeps their ‘chins-down’ – energised to implement the mission. Thus you need to know when to lead and when to manage. In his book, *A force for Change: How Leadership Differs from Management (1990)*, John Kotter distinguishes a manager and leader as follows: managers organise and control, whereas a manager who wants to lead needs to inspire, align and motivate his people.

The inspirational leader should give her people a big ‘why’ to act, whereas the typical manager says, “Why you're looking up? Get your chin down and work!” But if people are well led and with strong enough reason to act (a why), they won't mind being managed in a transactional way.

Summary

The diverse art of leadership rests on three pillars: Blending **trust** (reputational capital); **emotional engagement** (relational capital); and **competence** (managerial capital).

The definition of an excellent TEC marketing leader now becomes clear: Great leaders are **trusted** and emotionally **engaged** with their group and, because of their appropriate **competencies** and contextual awareness, they can intuit decisions and implement superior solutions faster than their rivals.

To compliment 20-years of practical marketing management experience, Ian Rheeder has spent the last four years studying the exciting field of neuroscience. The outcome of all this research is his TEC Model. Besides being a neuro-leadership model, TEC can also be used to explain any form of persuasion.

