Introduction

Professor John Adair's relatively simple action-centred leadership model provides a handy blueprint for leadership and management in a group or team setting. Its attraction is that it is easy to remember, apply and adapt.

According to Adair, good managers and leaders need to have full command of the three main areas of the action-centred or 'three-circle' leadership model. Being able to keep the right balance between the three core areas of task, team and individual, gets results, builds morale, improves quality, develops team working and is the mark of a successful manager and leader.

John Adair's action-centred leadership model

The three parts of the model are:

- achieving the **task**
- managing the **team** or group
- managing **individuals**

The model relates well to the demands of modern business management. It is adaptable and can be used in many and varied team situations. In this way it is a useful leadership management framework.

The responsibilities of a manager for achieving the **task** are:

- identify aims and vision for the group, purpose, and direction - define the activity (the task)
- identify resources, people, processes, systems and tools (inc. financials, communications, IT)
• create the plan to achieve the task - deliverables, measures, timescales, strategy and tactics
• establish responsibilities, objectives, accountabilities and measures, by agreement and delegation
• set standards, quality, time and reporting parameters
• control and maintain activities against parameters
• monitor and maintain overall performance against plan
• report on progress towards the group’s aim
• review, re-assess, adjust plan, methods and targets as necessary

The responsibilities of a manager for the **team** are:

• establish, agree and communicate standards of performance and behaviour
• establish style, culture, approach of the group - soft skill elements
• monitor and maintain discipline, ethics, integrity and focus on objectives
• anticipate and resolve group conflict, struggles or disagreements
• assess and change as necessary the balance and composition of the group
• develop team-working, cooperation, morale and team-spirit
• develop the collective maturity and capability of the team - progressively increase team freedom and authority
• encourage the team towards objectives and aims - motivate the team and provide a collective sense of purpose
• identify, develop and agree team- and project-leadership roles within group
• enable, facilitate and ensure effective internal and external team communications
• identify and meet team training needs
• give feedback to the team on overall progress; consult with, and seek feedback and input from the team

The responsibilities of a manager for each **individual** are:

• understand the team members as individuals - personality, skills, strengths, needs, aims and fears
• assist and support individuals - plans, problems, challenges, highs and lows
• identify and agree appropriate individual responsibilities and objectives
• give recognition and praise to individuals - acknowledge effort and good work
• where appropriate reward individuals with extra responsibility, advancement and status
• identify, develop and utilise each individual’s capabilities and strengths
• train and develop individual team members
• develop individual freedom and authority

**Action-centred leadership and John Adair**

John Adair, born in Britain in 1934, developed his action-centred leadership model while lecturing at Sandhurst Royal Military Academy and as assistant director and head of the
leadership department at The Industrial Society. This was during the 1960's and 1970's, and in terms of management theories, this is still relatively recent.

His work certainly encompasses and endorses much of the previous thinking on human needs and motivation by Maslow, Herzberg and Fayol and his theory adds an elegant and simple additional organisational dimension to these earlier works. Very importantly, Adair was probably the first to demonstrate that leadership is a trainable, transferable skill, rather than it being an exclusively inborn ability.

He helped change perception of management to encompass leadership. As well as developing the action-centred leadership model, he wrote over 25 books on management and leadership, including Effective Leadership, Not Bosses but Leaders, and Great Leaders. He maintains links with the University of Surrey, where he was the first UK chair of leadership studies, 1979-83.

Carol Kennedy's book 'Guide to the Management Gurus' supports the view that John Adair's ideas are fundamental and very significant in the development of management and leadership thinking. Leadership is different to management. All leaders are not necessarily great managers, but the best leaders will possess good management skills. One skill-set does not automatically imply the other will be present.

Adair uses the original word meanings to emphasise this distinction:

- Leadership is an ancient ability about deciding direction, from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning the road or path ahead; knowing the next step and then taking others with you to it.
- Managing is a later concept, from Latin 'manus', meaning hand, and more associated with handling a system or machine of some kind. The original concept of managing began in the 19th century when engineers and accountants started to become entrepreneurs.

There are valuable elements of management not necessarily found in leadership, e.g. administration and managing resources. Leadership on the other hand contains elements not necessarily found in management, e.g. inspiring others through the leader's own enthusiasm and commitment.

The action-centred leadership model is Adair's best known work, in which the three elements - Achieving the Task, Developing the Team and Developing Individuals - are seen to be at once independent and interdependent.

Adair lists what he sees as core functions of leadership and says they are vital to the action-centered leadership model:

- Planning - seeking information, defining tasks, setting aims Initiating - briefing, task allocation, setting standards
- Controlling - maintaining standards, ensuring progress, ongoing decision-making
- Supporting - individuals' contributions, encouraging, team spirit, reconciling, morale
- Informing - clarifying tasks and plans, updating, receiving feedback and interpreting
- Evaluating - feasibility of ideas, performance, enabling self assessment

This further suggests that the action-centred leadership model fully integrates the concepts of managing and leading.

Adair also promotes a '50:50 rule' which he applies to various situations involving two possible influencers, e.g. the view that 50% of motivation lies with the individual and 50% comes from external factors, among them leadership from another. This contradicts the common assertion that most motivation is from within the individual. He also suggests that 50% of team building success comes from the team and 50% from the leader.

Adair demonstrates how management thinking changes and becomes more sophisticated over time, in response to the development of previous management thinking. There is respect for Adair's work – it is seen as more accessible and relevant than other gurus' thinking. It is holistic in that it works easily in a multi-dimensional way and it gets right to the heart of the leadership role. By focusing on things that a leader must do, it explains very clearly why some succeed and others do not.

**Rethinking Leadership**

Speaking in October 2008, Adair appears to have refined his thinking. He says that in current, turbulent times, strong and focused leadership is set to become more important. He asserts that the 21st century leader needs to be 'a blend of Western, Eastern and tribal traditions'.

There is no such thing as a born leader, according to John Adair. He believes that leadership is learned through living and working with others. The problem is, when it comes to training, that many myths still exist about what actually makes a good leader in the first place.

The three fallacies Adair dismisses are that leadership is male, military and Western. He believes these have arisen because the West is still dogged by a leadership style defined in the US, when in fact the future of leadership development lies in blending elements of the Western tradition with those of the Eastern and tribal traditions, to create a new level of thinking.

When asked which elements he would extract from each, Adair says he would highlight the idea that there are qualities and skills needed from the Western tradition. From the Eastern approach, he would choose the idea that a true leader also has humility – you don't have to be a great extrovert or egotist, or have the charismatic presence people think is central to leadership. It is more self-effacing. From the tribal camp, he would
take integrity and moral soundness, with leaders being carefully chosen and approved by their peers. "There is a great emphasis on involving people in decisions, listening to them and consulting – something we often lose in the West," he adds.

By blending these elements, Adair believes you can unlock the power and potential of individuals. "We need the kind of leadership that can draw greatness out of people to meet problems," he says. "We are looking for good leaders and leaders for good."

"The Africans have a proverb that a log can lie in water for 10 years but it will never become a crocodile. There are too many people occupying leadership roles throughout the world who are logs, even though they are in the crocodile role," he says.

"Leadership and learning go hand in hand and we are just beginning to persuade people that leadership is something you learn throughout your life," he adds. "People want to be well-led and they will become increasingly intolerant of poor leadership."

There is more information available via John Adair's website www.johnadair.co.uk.