



Thoughts on Leadership with Kevin Cashman

In January of 2017, AESC spoke with Kevin Cashman, Senior Partner at Korn Ferry specializing in CEO & Executive Development. Below are excerpts from our discussion about evolving organizational trends and the implications for leaders and leadership.

AESC: The world has changed: does that mean the traits and qualities of an effective leader are different than they were years ago?

Cashman: I think there's a big debate going on in leadership, politics and cultures around the world and it's really a debate around openness and closedness; should we be inclusive of the world and cultures and leadership approaches, or should we be exclusive and careful?

All of our research would say that the world is going to belong to the most inclusive and the most open. It's where all innovations and all breakthroughs come from—the synthesis of multiple points of view. The world belongs to the most learning agile.

We've said the world belongs to the most learning agile and we have that

broken down in a research basis to four key characteristics: how open and self-aware are we to our own strengths and our developmental areas; how open are we to colleagues and team members to collaborate; how open are we to innovate; and how open are we to engaging the world to create value.

It's a big concept, and it's a big contextual thing, from Brexit to our election. Should we serve America or serve the world? There is important dialogue around inclusive and exclusive. I think in business and leadership on the global level, inclusion and openness is what will probably win. That's a big megatrend.

The other thing that's happening is the importance of *purpose* in driving performance and engagement to a new level. Many people will say this trend is driven by millennials. Yes, but it's also a human drive. Our challenge to leaders today is a two-part question: has performance become your purpose, or is purpose driving your performance?

Values have always been in the marketplace, but do those values serve multiple constituents or do those

values only self-serve a financial model? Companies may have a nice purpose and values statement, but in the day-to-day drive for performance and quarterly results, too often performance becomes the only purpose despite all of our values statements. The organizations that will thrive are the ones that put purpose first. In the long run, those are the companies that will create the most value. The drive around purpose-driven leadership is not going away.

AESC: Regarding values and purpose, is it as easy to bluff as it might have been 20 years ago?

Cashman: There's a company called KIND that produces KIND nutritional products. They're a very successful and socially progressive organization. Their CEO talks about the concept of authenticity, which has been key in our definition of leadership, and he made the connection between the personal authenticity of the leader and the authenticity of the products. If those things are connected you have a very powerful, very real value proposition. You cannot bluff that. You can market a cool product, but if the



Cashman, Senior Client Partner, CEO & Executive Development at Korn Ferry and founder of LeaderSource Ltd and the Chief Executive Institute™, shares perspectives on today's leadership with purpose

employees and customers don't see that as intimately connected with the leaders of the organization, it won't be seen to be real—and that is where the millennials are. Millennials are increasingly selecting companies based on authenticity and purpose and values: is this a place I want to be, to live and to associate with my own authenticity and purpose? Ultimately you can't bluff it.

AESC: Can leadership qualities be coached or trained?

Cashman: The answer is yes – it's the basic nature/nurture question. How much of leadership is born and how much is developed? It's a research-based answer. Within any leader there are some hard-wired traits, yet there are many that can be developed. The question is how do we foster peoples' development? We do it with stretch assignments, mentors, leadership programs and coaches; we also see people develop outside of work, with a board or church group. But ultimately development is a whole person process where we grow the best of ourselves to impact our leadership and our life.

AESC: Is there a way to assess for leadership potential?

Cashman: Years ago some of our legacy groups originated the research around Learning Agility. What we located, and this was a research conclusion, is that the ability to succeed in first-time conditions is a bigger predictor of potential than raw IQ. Learning agility, that ability to succeed in first-time conditions, is a real differentiator.

There are five factors in learning agility: mental agility, people agility, change agility, results agility and self-awareness. We all have different ratios of strengths in those areas. The most agile leaders tend, at midlevel career, to accelerate two competencies: intellectual, strategic, integrative thinking, which leads to strategy; and the ability to connect, inspire, communicate and collaborate, which leads to engagement.

AESC: The evolving workplace has increased automation, people working remotely or as contractors, digital work platforms, flatter organizational structures, and new C-suite roles. What is it

that a leader has to be able to do, to successfully run an organization under these circumstances?

Cashman: It's a challenging leadership situation. Business is becoming low-touch because of all the digital. What may not be accelerating as quickly is how we, as leaders, are finding all the different ways to have that human interaction.

We're not machines. We have emotional, spiritual, human interaction needs. So especially with the new generation coming up, how do we get up to speed to have really authentic conversations with the new vehicle of communication? Some of it is using social media better – really being connected, really informing, really having conversations on social media that are not just transactive. I think there could be other ways as technology goes to the next level – they're already talking about holograms being beamed into offices.

It feels like we're getting disconnected, which challenges leaders to open up more quickly, to inspire more, to tell more stories, to get connected on social media and so on, so that the human

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element has a chance of being balanced with the technological. I think that’s a call to leaders to bring the human dimension into their leadership even more powerfully than they are now, or we may get really disconnected.

AESC: Can you address the increase in people working and conducting business remotely, and the leadership challenge that presents?

Cashman: I remember the days you’d be out at appointments, and you had to go in to get your pink slip messages. You had to go into the office to get a lot of things done. Now, we have a generation where people are interacting virtually.

Also many people don’t have to go to stores anymore – pretty soon retail spaces are going to be exotic. This has all sorts of lifestyle implications – when people don’t have to commute, that can really free people up. We’re starting to see less and less need for offices.

How do you balance the efficient, the technical and the human? I’ve done meetings when I’m advising a board using very hi-tech video, which kind of “drops you in the boardroom” – it’s so much better than a phone conference or even video conference. The next level of technology appears to be 3D holograms. I would love how much travel that would save!

AESC: Top performing team members have a lot of choices. We don’t live in a world where people stay in one place at work. How does a leader sustain shared purpose and a collaborative environment?

Cashman: This gets into research around engagement. Why do some companies have more engagement and some less? Why do some companies have more tenure and some less? Why do some organizations really retain people, and how? What we’ve found is that most of us think compensation is the big way to retain people, and it is not—challenge and promotion, sense of purpose, and a boss who coaches and develops people are higher factors in retention. To be detached from people and just think retention is about compensation doesn’t work—that’s an old-world mindset.

The Saratoga Institute conducted almost 20,000 exit interviews. They interviewed the bosses and

asked, “Why did people leave?” and 90% of the bosses said employees left for compensation. Then they interviewed the exiting people, and asked, “Why did you leave?” The number one response: “The boss.” That is the dynamic out there. When people are more flexible and fluid and have more opportunity, what do you need to do to engage them? The answer is a sense of purpose, high challenge, professional development, and someone being involved and caring about them and their development. These are the real differentiators for retention.

AESC: What is the relationship between flatter organizations and retention?

Cashman: There are pluses and minuses—a flatter organization means higher stress, less resources, greater lifestyle challenges. Those things are written about. But the upside is not written about; greater stretch assignments, greater diversity of challenges and learning, greater resourcefulness. It’s hard to sustain engagement if an organization is too flat and too lean. On the other hand, if organizations are not flat enough, they can be hierarchical and bureaucratic, and lack development stretches. What’s the sweet spot between? It’s challenging. It’s hard to sustain engagement and energy if an organization is too flat, and hard to sustain development if an organization is too hierarchical.

AESC: Can you address some of the things that can’t be automated, and how leaders must adjust to automation?

Cashman: It creates a bit of an either-or. Some may say that automation and leadership do not go together, but in a sense, they already do. Even emails and social media are forms of automated leadership. The question is, in the email or social media, even the phone conference where we’re using technology – is our leadership *in* that technology, or disconnected from it? You can send an email that is very transactive—it just exchanges info—or a leader can send a warm, genuine, appreciative email, and it can activate leadership and inspiration.

The real question is how do you show up in technology? How do you make sure that you show up with warmth and caring and connection, concern, authenticity and realness, because

technology is a *tool* of leadership, it doesn't replace it. That maybe means you have to really show up more, that you're really *there* in it. Is the automated device just sharing information, or is it a tool to foster real innovation? Is the device replacing the person or is the person transmitting through the device?

The challenge now is to make sure that our humanity and our leadership show up in all the technology that we employ.

AESC: As you speak about leaders showing up with humanity, can you explain the difference between inspiration and manipulation?

Cashman: There's a leadership model we created where one axis is *authenticity* from low to high, and the other is *relevance* from low to high. If both authenticity and relevance are low, you have disconnected communication; when authenticity is low and relevance is high you are probably manipulating; if authenticity is high and relevance is low, you're probably self-absorbed. When both authenticity and relevance are high, that's inspiring. Having authenticity that's relevant to others is the sweet spot.

AESC: And ethics?

Cashman: What's interesting to me about ethics is there's a great writer, John Dalla Costa, who wrote *The Ethical Imperative*. I asked him what ethics is. He said, "In 25 years of research this is what I know for sure: ethics is others." A very simple but profound statement.

The leaders that mainly are about 'self' can get results, they can get adulation, they can get externalized success, but they also tend to get into all sorts of ethical issues. The leaders who are really focused on 'how am I serving others' are the ones who, over the long run, are going to be the most ethical leaders. That gets harder as you get more elevated in the organization or in bigger organizations – you might impact millions of people around the world and you're bound to make ethical mistakes and serve one constituency and not another. The aspiration to serve others is key – it goes back to values. It all goes back to the question, what is the enduring value we are creating beyond only the financial measure?

It takes unbelievable courage to stand up and serve a bigger purpose.

AESC: Can you take anyone and make him or her into an inspirational leader?

Cashman: It takes decades for most people to mature as a leader – experience, competencies, traits, values—it has to be built up over time, and then they have to expand across the enterprise. It's an evolution. People may show qualities early, but it takes real dedication over decades. It's not a simple thing.

As far as we know, human beings are the most complex system in the known universe. Leadership is maybe not the most complex human behavior – love might be – but it is likely number two. It is a really complicated, difficult thing to develop and be good at. It's one of the most complex behaviors in one of the most complex systems we know. It's not simplistic. But thank goodness we now have done the research and now have the methodologies to foster accelerated development in leaders.

AESC: How does one lead through disruption?

Cashman: It's tough, but we have to ask ourselves, what is bigger, the volatility or our vision? It also goes back to a passion to serve and make a bigger difference. Managers are more motivated to improve 'what is' and maintain 'what is.' Disruptive, transformative leaders want to go beyond 'what is' – they want to go into the new, into the different, into the unusual. So that core drive of going beyond 'what is' is the core drive of real, authentic, transformative leaders. Learning agility gives us what we need to make it happen, but at the core is a drive that we have to go beyond the status quo. That's where the future's created.

AESC: What is the most important trend in leadership?

Cashman: The big megatrend is the debate related to whether we should be more open, or more closed. Should we be more inclusive or more exclusive? In the world of business the case is closed—we have to be inclusive. The internet and technology are accelerating more openness. There is no going back—we can only go forward, even if it's scary to some of us. And so to me, our most important challenge in leadership: courageously creating the future together. ■

Kevin Cashman is a bestselling author, keynote speaker and internationally recognized pioneer in the field of CEO and executive development. He is currently Senior Partner, CEO & Executive Development, at Korn Ferry.