



Discussion Questions for HR Teams using *First Leaders*

Context

First Nations people have been refining leadership for millennia. By comparison, the discipline of workplace leadership emerged only about 100 years ago – just a few generations back. Over the long timeframe of their experience, First Nations have figured out what works and what doesn't. The timeless wisdom of First Nation societies can help HR teams improve leadership practices in their organisation.

Learning Objectives

In using the book *First Leaders* to explore workplace leadership, the objectives are to:

1. Help individual leaders at each level of the organisation enhance their own leadership.
2. Assist senior executives reflect on their personal leadership style and impact.
3. Assist HR teams review and improve the key leadership practices in their organisation.
4. Increase the respect we have for First Nation societies by appreciating the depth of their leadership wisdom.

This document supports Objective 3. Separate guides are available to support Objectives 1, 2 and 4.

Design

The questions that follow are designed for discussion in workshops of HR team members. The questions are designed to draw out key aspects of First Nations leadership and how that wisdom can help leadership practices in an organisation.

The questions aim to generate ideas and actions on the most critical aspects of leadership in First Nation societies. Beyond these questions, *First Leaders* has comprehensive recommendations and checklists for leaders and for leadership practices in organisations.

The questions below provide for an extensive workshop. As alternatives to one extensive workshop, options are to a) cover the topics over several sessions, b) form sub-groups to look at separate topics and report back to the whole team or c) to just cover the topics that are most relevant right now.

Along with a copy of *First Leaders*, this document should be distributed to team members before the workshop or team meeting. This allows participants to reflect and prepare.

Overall

This section covers your overall impression of the leadership practices of First Nations societies outlined in the 11 Principles of First Leadership described in the book.

1. What impressed me most about the leadership approach of First Nation societies?
2. What are the core philosophies that underpin leadership across First Nation societies?
3. To what extent do those core philosophies apply in our organisation?
4. Are there particularly challenging aspects of the leadership approach of First Nations?
5. Why are those dimensions challenging – what is it about my own experience and perspective that makes the approach of First Nations challenging to me?
6. How many of the key leadership principles already apply in our organisation?
7. What principles of First Nations leadership do not currently apply? Which of those should we look to implement?

Organisation Structure

Across First Nation societies, there is a common approach to organising their population. This approach applies irrespective of whether the society is organised around small band groups or organised as divisions and even as a nation.

1. What is the key design principle of First Nations?
2. To what extent do we already apply that approach in our organisation?
3. Where we deviate from the approach of First Nations, do we observe any shortcomings in performance outcomes that might be associated with dysfunctional organisational design?
4. Do we have many instances in our organisation where leaders have just one, two or three direct reports? (First Nations have clear leadership levels and don't over-manage by imposing too many leaders on followers.)
5. What changes in organisation design would benefit our organisation?
6. What are possible starting points to improve organisation design?

Treating People with Respect

Across First Nation societies, the common attribute that qualifies a person for leadership is that they treat other people with respect.

1. To what extent do we prioritise respect when we are appointing leaders?
2. To what extent do we include respect (and associated behaviours) in our leadership development programs?
3. To what extent do we have tools and programs that help leaders show respect for people (e.g. generous recognition programs, individual-based learning processes)?
4. Do we have effective tools (such as staff surveys) to identify leaders who show respect and any that show disrespect of their people?
5. As an organisation, to what extent do we hold to account leaders who demonstrate disrespect? How active are the managers of these disrespectful leaders in addressing the disrespectful behaviours?

Selecting Leaders

Chapter 4 of *First Leaders* begins with reference to how effective Maasai society is in selecting leaders.

1. How close are we to the benchmark set by the Maasai that 91% of followers adore their leader?
2. In our organisation, how much time and care do we take in selecting leaders?
3. Do we take extra time and care with senior leadership appointments?
4. In our organisation, what role do followers play in the selection of their leader?
5. What more could we do in systematically having followers play more of a role?
6. To what extent do we appoint leaders from within? Or do we disadvantage internal candidates by our leaders being attracted to external candidates who look like they have no weaknesses?

Appointment of Leaders

First Nations have rituals that signal the significance of leadership appointments.

1. What's our view about the point made in *First Leaders* of the importance of signalling leadership appointments for both the leader and the followers?
2. Do we want to take some steps in that direction?
3. Should we do something symbolic for each level of leadership appointment (team, department, division, organisation)?
4. Is there a symbol of leadership that we should introduce?

Checks on Leadership Power

One of the ways followers have more power in First Nations than in workplaces is through the checks on leadership power that operate in First Nations.

1. Do we educate leaders (at every level) on the constructive use of power?
2. Are our senior leaders active in modelling and coaching on the appropriate use of power?
3. Do we have mechanisms to identify how leaders use (or abuse or underuse) their power?
4. What would most leaders answer to the question at the top of page 146 of *First Leaders*: Have there been any instances in our organisation of a manager being moved out of leadership because of poor behaviour?
5. What more should be done in implementing checks on leadership power?

Culture

First Nation societies find a balance between individual autonomy and group interests – this forms the culture of the group.

1. What are the emotional benefits to our individual staff in being a member of our organisation? (For a person to contain their personal motivations there needs to be some emotional return for the person from belonging to the group.)
2. What are the five to six key values that form the culture of our organisation? Are these values known? Are the values expressed as behaviours?
3. To what extent in our organisation do we insist on standards of work and behaviour?
4. What role do we give the elders – the aunties and uncles – in protecting our culture?

Individual Identity Through Learning

First Nation societies are learning organisations and their focus on individual learning means people are valued as individuals and not lost in the group.

1. To what extent do our learning and development mechanisms foster a focus on the individual?
2. To what extent do we have mechanisms that support leaders as developers of their people?
3. Do we have a mechanism to know if our staff view their leader as someone who has supported and accelerated their development?
4. Do we have a straightforward approach to mentoring – where we don't over-engineer it with process and controls?
5. Do our senior leaders model the way as developers of the next generation?
6. Should we identify a First Nations term for our focus on individual learning?

Gender Equity

First Leaders refers to the historic gender inequity in early human societies. The book makes the point that it's in understanding this historic inequity that we can take actions that will make a real difference to gender equity.

1. How close is our organisation to being an environment of gender equity?
2. Do we as HR model the way of gender equity?
3. How recently have we completed an investigation of possible gender-based pay inequity? Do we need to complete a review? Who should be the sponsor of the review?
4. How recently have we reviewed gender-friendly policies?
5. To what extent do our talent review and promotion processes ensure decisions are free of gender bias?
6. Are our senior leaders active in supporting gender equity and mentoring female talent?
7. Should we implement a mentoring system involving other organisations in our neighbourhood?
8. Do we have appropriate targets for gender equity?

Group Cohesion

First Nations societies invest time, effort and resources in building group unity.

1. What are the key practices of First Nations societies that contribute to social unity?
2. How harmonious are the various departments or divisions of our organisation?
3. Do all our departments or divisions feel valued for their contribution (or are there elitist groups)?
4. What rituals and regular ceremonies do we have that build unity across the organisation? What more could we do?
5. What mechanisms do our leaders have to assist them invest time and resources in group unity (e.g. at the team level, at the department level)?
6. As HR, what are the departments we work closely with and how harmonious are those relationships? What actions should we take?
7. As an organisation, do we orchestrate transfers across departments (which helps reduce barriers between departments)?
8. Do we have effective orientation programs so new starters quickly fit in and get a good sense for the organisation? Are our senior leaders active in this program?

Conclusion

In the Introduction and Conclusion of *First Leaders* the point is made that implementation of the Principles of First Leadership is flexible. The important thing is to make a start.

1. What are, say, the one or two most important immediate initiatives that will help us and our leaders be closer to the style of First Nations?
2. Over a longer timeframe, what other subjects will be important for us to improve so that we achieve strong group unity and strong organisation performance?

