

The 7 Gears of Leadership, And When to Use Each One

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Leaders acquire tremendous human capacities as they rise to the top. Their challenge is to deploy the right strength for each difficult situation.

Navigating the unique landscape of family businesses and family offices requires a special kind of leadership—one that's both deeply personal and highly strategic. For years, we've had the privilege of working alongside incredible individuals and families as they build legacies, overcome challenges, and strive for enduring success. In this journey, we've noticed that the most effective leaders aren't just intelligent or experienced; they're agile and possess immense capacity. Capacity is your range of capabilities; for instance, in communication can you both advocate and accommodate. Agility is mindfully choosing which of those to use in each circumstance.

Think of leadership like driving a vehicle. You wouldn't use the same gear to climb a steep hill as you would to cruise on a flat highway, right? Similarly, the best leaders understand that different situations demand different approaches. And just as a vehicle's transmission dictates the gears' ability to handle various terrains, a leader's capacity determines their ability to navigate complex relational and business challenges.

We all have our "default gears"—those automatic responses we lean on when things get stressful or intense. Maybe you're a natural problem-solver, always jumping in with solutions. Or perhaps your default is to offer support and empathy. While these are valuable traits, true leadership agility isn't about relying on one gear: it's about mindfully choosing the right gear for the right moment.

Here are the gears we often discuss with our clients

(though you can obviously tailor these to your organization's needs), along with the shadow side (i.e. the misuse of a gear), which is the dark or less productive side of a gear, and examples of each. While our focus and our examples are on family businesses, leaders of non-family businesses can also find plenty of situations where these tools can help, if deployed thoughtfully.

1. Feedback: Offering Direct, Constructive Input

Sometimes, what's needed most is clear, concise feedback. This gear is about providing direct, constructive input, when someone is off track or needing a course correction, and when you want to reinforce positive behavior.

When to use it: When performance isn't meeting expectations, or a specific behavior is hindering progress, or to reinforce positive behavior.

Example: Imagine your cousin, who manages the marketing department, has been consistently missing deadlines for key campaigns. Instead of stepping in and doing the work yourself (which is a different gear), you might say, "Mark, I've noticed the last three campaign deadlines have been missed. This is impacting our launch schedule. Let's talk about what's going on and how we can get you back on track." This is direct, focused on behavior, and aimed at improvement.

Shadow: If there is a highly politicized environment where trust is low, it is less appropriate to give or ask for feedback. If trust is low, either on an organizational or individual level, the person is apt to stay defensive and not accept the feedback.

Shadow Example: Two of the family members have initiated a lawsuit against each other. This would not be an appropriate context to either ask for or offer feedback

to that other family member.

2. Advice/Problem-Solving: Providing Practical Ideas and Solutions

Many a leader has this as their go-to gear. As leaders, we're wired to fix things. This involves offering practical ideas and solutions when someone is genuinely stuck and needs a clear path forward.

When to use it: When a team member or family member is facing a novel challenge, or when a quick, decisive solution is required to prevent a significant issue.

Example: Your nephew is relatively new to his role. He comes to you after trying to review a contract. You advise him to take it to in-house counsel for a more expert review.

Shadow: If you default to problem-solving or advice when it is more of a relationship emotional issue, and you create a distance or even erode trust.

Shadow Example: Your nephew has just been let go from the family business for poor performance. He was surprised and deeply embarrassed to tell his parents. His father reacts by saying what his son should have done, what he would have done, and the errors he made. The son, in no place to hear this advice, storms out of the room hurt and upset.

3. Support/Validation: Reflecting Emotions, Offering Empathy

Family dynamics can cause emotions to run hot. The support and validation gear is about stepping into someone's shoes, reflecting their emotions, and offering genuine empathy. It's about being heard and understood, thus validating their emotions.

When to use it: When someone is feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, or emotional, and they primarily need to vent or feel validation. Problem-solving reduces the sense of connection in these moments.

Example: Your brother, a partner in the business, just had a difficult conversation with a long-time client. He comes to you exasperated. Instead of immediately jumping to "What did you say?" or "What should we do?," you might respond: "Wow, that sounds incredibly

frustrating and draining. It's tough when you pour so much into a relationship and it feels unappreciated." This validates his feelings and creates a safe space for him to reflect and regain his center.

Shadow: If you give faint praise as compared to validating the emotions expressed, you risk creating the opposite result of feeling less connected.

Shadow Example: Your sister, a partner in the business, has just had a difficult conversation with a client. You say: you are so much smarter than him, he never knows what he is talking about, don't give it a second thought, you were right, he was wrong.

4. Coaching: Asking Guiding Questions to Draw Insight

The coaching gear is one of the most powerful for fostering long-term growth. Instead of providing answers, ask questions that help others discover their own solutions and deepen their understanding.

When to use it: When you want to empower someone, help them develop their critical thinking skills, or encourage ownership of their challenges and solutions.

Example: Your son, a rising leader in the family office, is struggling to delegate effectively. You could ask: "What do you think is holding you back from entrusting these tasks to your team?" or "What would it look like if you delegated this successfully? What would change for you and for them?" These questions prompt self-reflection and lead to self-discovered solutions.

Shadow: When there isn't the appropriate context for coaching (i.e. either not labeling that you are in a coaching mode or the trust in the relationship isn't established), then the recipient won't feel it is appropriate to be vulnerable.

Shadow Example: You call an employee in who has been accused of misusing company funds yet again and you will likely have to terminate her. Asking her; What do you think might have been some other options to address your financial situations at home, would be inappropriate because you are not in a coaching mode but acting as a supervisor. You need to address the legal issue directly and not muddy the waters by getting into the personal financial issues of this employee.

5. Brainstorming: Generating

Possibilities Collaboratively

Sometimes, the best approach is to simply throw ideas around together. The brainstorming gear is all about collaborative idea generation, where no idea is a bad idea and the goal is quantity and creativity.

When to use it: When a new challenge arises, when innovation is needed, or when the team needs to feel ownership over a solution.

Example: The family council is trying to figure out how to engage the next generation more effectively. You might say: "Let's just spend the next 20 minutes throwing out every idea we have, no matter how wild. How can we make the next generation feel truly invested and heard?" This encourages open, uninhibited contribution.

Shadow: When there either is not time or constraints limit which options are available.

Shadow Example: The board has asked management for their strategic plan along with a budget to be approved at this meeting. The management team wants to start a brainstorming session. A board member comments this feels like avoidance.

6. Reverse/Repair: Acknowledging Missteps, Re-attuning to the Relationship

We all make mistakes, especially leaders dealing with complex family dynamics. The reverse/repair gear is crucial for rebuilding trust and mending relationships after a misstep. It's about humble accountability—recognizing when you've been in the wrong gear, missed a signal, or acted out of sync with others. Sometimes it's essential even when no major wrong has taken place, but merely to repair perceptions of having been wronged. This gear requires a leader to pause, reflect, and re-attune.

Here is where emotional intelligence becomes essential: the ability to offer a sincere apology, to take ownership without defensiveness, and to show a willingness to make things right. In family systems, where history and emotion run deep, even small gestures of repair can go a long way in restoring connection and reaffirming mutual respect. Engaging the reverse/repair gear doesn't slow down progress—it clears the path forward.

When to use it: When you've made an error, misunderstood someone, or said something that caused offense, whether you believe it should have caused offense, or damaged trust.

Example: Perhaps you jumped into problem-solving when your sister truly just needed to vent. Later, you realize your mistake. You might say, "Hey, I was thinking about our conversation earlier, and I realized I jumped straight into solutions when what you really needed was just for me to listen. I apologize if that felt dismissive. Can we talk about it again, and I'll focus on just listening this time?" This simple act of acknowledgment can be incredibly powerful.

Shadow: When you use this to derail a conversation that is going in favor of the other person and not you.

Shadow Example: You realize in a board meeting that the independent board member is making a very persuasive case for not offering dividends this year (which you have advocated for). You say: Hey, I think we got off track on this. Can we start over again after lunch?

7. Peer: Showing Up Informally, Shoulder-to-Shoulder

In a family context, it's vital to occasionally take off the "leader" hat and show up simply as a fellow human being. The peer gear is about cultivating informal connections, shared experience, and presence without hierarchy. It means engaging with co-workers—especially family members—not just around roles and responsibilities, but around relationships. Building peer-to-peer trust creates the emotional strength of the system; it lays the groundwork so that when missteps inevitably happen, there's enough goodwill to shift into reverse and repair. The peer gear fosters a culture where accountability, support, and mutual respect can flourish.

When to use it: When building rapport, fostering camaraderie, or when a formal leadership stance would create distance rather than connection.

Example: You and your cousin are both working late on a big project. Instead of offering advice or feedback, you might simply say: "Man, this is a grind, isn't it? Glad we're in this together." Or sharing a personal anecdote about a similar challenge you faced. It's about shared humanity and mutual support, not about one person

leading the other.

Shadow: Like the coaching gear, the peer gear requires that others be able to see you as a peer, so if the hierarchical distance is too great, you likely be sending all kinds of unintended messages. This is especially true when interacting with those who are naturally skeptical.

Shadow Example: You are the CEO of your large family business. You are walking around the plant and say to one of the hourly workers: Boy it sure is tough paying the bills in this economy. She knows you are more than comfortable and this feels far from sincere.

Building Capacity: The Foundation for Agility

Being able to mindfully shift between these gears isn't something that happens overnight. It's built on a bedrock of increasing capacity. What do we mean by capacity?

Think of it like this: Imagine a person's journey of increasing their capacity for travel. They start by crawling, then learn to walk, then run. They might then learn to ride a bike, drive a car, and eventually even pilot an airplane. Each step represents a new level of capacity, allowing them to navigate more complex environments with greater speed and efficiency. Crucially, the pilot who can fly a plane can still walk to the local business if that's the most effective way to get there. Their higher capacity doesn't limit their simpler options; it expands their range of possibilities. A fundamental way to increase your capacity is by increasing your mindfulness.

By mindfulness, we mean an ever-deepening awareness of yourself, others, and the situation. The greater one's awareness, the greater the capacity for reading the moment and choosing the right approach or gear. That's why top leaders often have a daily practice to deepen their awareness.

Increasing capacity means:

- **Deepening Self-Awareness:** Understanding your own default gears, triggers, biases, and emotional patterns. The more you know yourself, the better you can manage your responses.
- **Cultivating Empathy:** The ability to truly understand and share the feelings of another.

This is critical to improving family dynamics, where history and emotion are always present.

- **Effectively Framing Complex Issues:** Stepping back from the immediate emotional charge or the overwhelming details to see the bigger picture, identify root causes, and articulate challenges in a way that promotes constructive dialogue.
- **Innovating More Effectively:** Moving beyond traditional ways of thinking and embracing new possibilities. This requires an open mind and a willingness to challenge assumptions.
- **Developing a Broader Perspective (i.e., Deepening Awareness):** The ability to transcend your own ego, family biases, industry norms, or cultural limitations to gain a more insightful view of situations. This allows for more effective and strategic action.

As awareness deepens and becomes more integrated, one's capacity naturally increases. You start to see beyond the surface, anticipate challenges, and respond with greater wisdom and intentionality.

Conclusion

The ability to shift gears mindfully and continuously build your personal and collective capacity isn't just nice-to-have -- it's essential for navigating complexity, fostering healthy relationships, and ensuring the enduring legacy of your family's endeavors. If this is true for any business, it is far truer for a family enterprise!

So, we invite you to reflect: What are your default gears? What gear might you try engaging more often? And how can you continue to expand your capacity (including your awareness) as a leader, allowing you to soar when needed, but also know when to simply walk alongside those you lead? The journey of leadership is continuous, and the rewards of mindful agility are immeasurable.

References

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