

SKYLINE G

Maximizing Leadership Influence
Through Creating Shared Reality:
*Aligning Individual and Team Performance
Through Social Tuning and Creating a
Shared Reality*



A common way to think of leadership is providing a shared vision for where you and your team want to go and clear directions on how to get there. A less talked about but equally important aspect of being a leader is your ability to create a shared *reality* for your people, giving them a framework for what's happening right now and how it aligns (or doesn't) with your vision for the future.

A leader with strong influencing skills creates buy-in and support for their ideas by building consensus and gaining cooperation. Think of a shared reality as the ultimate expression of consensus-building—every member of the team is on the same page as the leader in terms of their attitudes, beliefs, judgments, and evaluations of what is occurring within the organization. When each team member's attitudes and views are so exquisitely aligned with their leader's, they can more easily tune into what the leader believes is needed to move things forward. Consequently, leaders who can create a shared reality can exert more influence and be more effective at achieving company goals.

In this paper, we will discuss the importance of creating a shared reality, how to influence others to see what you are seeing as a leader (social tuning), and avoiding what can happen when your unintentional shared reality creates a negative us/them dynamic within your organization.

Shared Reality and Social Tuning

In a 2017 paper on the topic, social scientists Echterhoff, Higgins, and Levine defined “shared reality” as a perceived commonality of people's inner states (emotions, attitudes, and beliefs) regarding an event or issue. For a shared reality to occur, they posited, the people involved must be motivated to have their inner states align.¹

Take this example: Joe, a new employee, goes up to Elaine and Rashid, who have been working at the company for over five years and are close colleagues. Joe has a loud voice, looks both of them in the eye as he introduces himself and states very clearly that he looks forward to working with them both. Because Elaine and Rashid have a shared reality about the social norms of their workplace, they both perceive Joe's directness as overly blunt and aggressive.

However, when Joe introduces himself to Lucas in much the same way Lucas has a very different perception. He appreciates how forthcoming Joe is and labels him a straight shooter. Lucas has only been at the company for a few months and clearly does not share the same reality as Elaine and Rashid.

¹ Echterhoff, G.; Tory Higgins, E.; and Levine, John (2017). “Shared Reality: Experiencing Commonality With Others' Inner States About the World.” Retrieved from <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1111/j.1745-6924.2009.01161.x>

Later in the day, Lucas meets up with Elaine and Rashid to talk about Joe and ask them their thoughts. Elaine comments on how Joe didn't spend any time getting to know them as people—he went straight to business, talking about work. She found that off-putting. Rashid agrees. Lucas sees how their views of the new guy are not in sync with his, and as another relatively new employee, he doesn't want to be the odd man out. As he replays his own conversation with Joe in his mind, his perception of what happened begins to change. He allows himself to be influenced by Elaine's attitude toward Joe and morphs his own opinion to align with hers. This phenomenon is known as social tuning—the tendency for one individual's attitude to gravitate to another person's in the group when they become aware of it.²

In the example above, Elaine as the more tenured employee in the company is exerting her influence over newer employee Lucas. Because Lucas has a vested interest in being part of the social circle within the organization, he tunes his emotions, attitudes, and beliefs towards his meeting with the new guy to match Elaine's.

It is pretty clear why these two important social science concepts—shared reality and social tuning—can have great implications in the workplace. By creating a dynamic whereby people want to align their emotions, attitudes, and beliefs with the leader, the leader's job of influencing them to achieve specific goals becomes easier. And the more in tune everyone's inner states become, the stronger the shared reality that connects them becomes, providing them with greater shared context and motivation to achieve more together. We posit that when leaders can create a shared reality that aligns with company goals, they:

- Build trust in leadership
- Create interpersonal connections that extend influence
- Align personal attitudes with leadership and with company objectives
- Achieve greater social and group coordination towards goal fulfillment

In the next section, we provide practical advice on how to apply these social science concepts in the workplace to maximize your influence and effectiveness as a leader.

How to Create a Shared Reality Aligned with Company Goals

For a shared reality to occur, the following conditions must be met:

1. People must be motivated to have their inner states (emotions, attitudes, and beliefs) aligned
2. There must be a perceived commonality of people's inner states regarding an event or issue.

² Shteynberg, G. (2010). "A Silent Emergence of Culture: The Social Tuning Effect." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 99(4), 683– 689.

Determining Motivation

The good news is that humans are social beings and as such, we crave connection. We desire to experience a shared reality with others.³ We are inherently motivated to have our inner states align with those around us. This is particularly true when there are common goals at stake, for example, doing meaningful work, completing a project, supporting our teammates, making our bosses happy, and the overall success of the company.

However, not all people are equally motivated to connect with others in this way. As a leader, one important aspect of your role is to determine the “tune-ability” of your employees. Generally speaking, less opinionated employees who opt to take the middle ground in decision-making are more tunable than those who have very clear, fixed opinions and are difficult to persuade. You will have an easier time molding tunable employees to your values, but you risk tuning them in the wrong direction if your values and goals are not clear.

Less tune-able employees require more effort to align their inner states with a leader’s; however, once they are aligned they will not be easily swayed otherwise. In addition, the challenges you face in persuading them to share your reality will likely help you form a clearer picture of what you see going on and how it aligns with your team’s and company’s goals. A useful tool for determining the tune-ability of an employee (or job candidate) is a fixed versus growth mindset assessment.⁴ In general, the more fixed the mindset of the person, the less tunable they are.

Sharing Your Reality

So how can leaders leverage this natural human tendency to create a shared reality for their team that aligns with company goals? The first step is getting clear on the reality you want to share with your team members. How can you frame what is occurring within the company in a way that taps into what they are experiencing *and* gives them the context for what you want to happen next? Here are some questions you can ask yourself to facilitate this process:

What is your position on XXX occurrence?

Why do you care about it?

What problem does your position solve or what opportunity does it create?

What do others need to do or stop doing to achieve what you want?

What are your employees’ experiences about XXX occurrence?

What are the emotions that you are seeing and feeling from them?

What do they think will be the effect on them of this event?

What questions can you ask to clarify their perceptions of what is happening?

³ Echterhoff, G.; Tory Higgins, E.; and Levine, John (2017).

⁴ London Academy of IT. “Interactive Quiz: Fixed vs Growth Mindsets.” Retrieved from <http://www.londonacademyofit.co.uk/learning-blog/learning/interactive-quiz-fixed-vs-growth-mindset/>

According to renowned social psychologist Leon Festinger, people “experience their personal beliefs and opinions as being valid when they are shared by others who are sufficiently similar to themselves.”⁵ Applied to the workplace, this means your job as a leader is to validate the personal beliefs and opinions of your team members that align with the way you want them to perceive a particular event or situation. In order to do this, you must persuade them that you all are “sufficiently similar.” You must find a way to convince the team that you’re all in this together to solidify your shared perceptions of what is occurring.

That feeling of commonality, which is key to a shared reality, requires leaders to connect on a personal level (emotions, attitudes, and beliefs) with employees. You need to be aware of and acknowledge the emotions that you see in your employees as well as anticipate what they will experience. The skills necessary here are those often cited for transformational leaders: You must be empathetic and proactive in addressing the needs of your team members and the situation. And when in doubt, check in with them to acknowledge, inquire, and clarify. What is their reality? In what ways does it converge with reality you want for the organization? Use those natural points of convergence as a jumping off point to build their trust in you and belief that you are sharing their experience.

Next is where influence and social tuning come in. Influencing others is the ability to persuade other people that your ideas and positions are valid—and also their own. Social tuning is the tendency for the view of an individual to gravitate toward that of another group member when individuals become aware of that group member’s attitude.

One of the most common examples of social tuning is known as the Saying is Believing effect.⁶ It occurs when one member of group (Person A) openly expresses their opinion of an event, person, or issue that another group member (Person B) has also experienced and Person B’s opinion naturally gravitates towards Person A’s. Merely communicating about the issue at hand affects the other person’s evaluation of it, creating a shared reality of that event.

And so, if leaders have been successful in creating sufficient feelings of similarity and togetherness with their team, they can employ social tuning to extend their influence and create a shared reality that keeps everyone on the same page and their motivations aligned.

Pitfalls: Creating a Negative Reality

It is easy—and often unintentional—for leaders to fall into the trap of creating a negative shared reality. It most often occurs during times of stress when the most expedient route to uplifting everyone’s spirits is shifting the blame to something that is out of their direct control.

⁵ Festinger, L. (1950). Informal social communication. *Psychological Review*, 57, 271–282.

⁶ Echterhoff, G.; Tory Higgins, E.; and Levine, John (2017).

“I know we’re behind on our deadline, but don’t worry I think we’re doing great. It’s only because Product didn’t hand us the specs until the last minute. I know it’s not our fault but we have to make this happen so let’s just push through.”

Sometimes a leader intentionally creates an us/them dynamic to gain a competitive edge against other team leaders and boost their own status in the organization.

“Jim doesn’t know how to motivate his people—that’s why Product handed us the specs so late. I know it’s going to be rough, and it’s not fair, but we’re going to have to pick up their slack. Next time, I’ll just have to step in earlier to make sure Jim is on the ball with his guys and they don’t screw things up for us again.”

In both instances, while the leader has successfully creating a feeling of commonality and a shared reality with their team, that reality is not in the best interest of the company. In the short term, the team feels unified and their commitment to working together is increased. In the long term, however, the Us/Them dynamic leads to friction with other teams and potential misalignment with overall company goals.

In times of stress, it is important for leaders to remember that the shared reality they propagate must not only line up with what the team needs to see and to achieve, but also how the team fits into the larger organizational picture. Intentional or not, it is up to more senior leadership to identify when a negative us/them dynamic is occurring and to work with the leader to correct the situation through:

- Honing in on the underlying issues that allowed the dynamic to emerge, such as a culture that does not reward collaboration
- Identifying mechanisms to increase communication and collaboration on company-wide objectives
- Developing new “causes” that bring the team(s) together, such as creating competition with external competitors versus other teams in the organization

Conclusion

Leaders can use their powers of influence to create a shared reality with their team and in doing so, they also extend their influence and leadership effectiveness. Creating a shared reality gives people a framework for what’s happening right now and how it aligns (or doesn’t) with the company’s vision for the future. It provides them with the necessary context to move forward with their goals. To create a shared reality, leaders must connect with the inner states (attitudes, emotions, and beliefs) of their team members. Just as importantly, the team members must perceive that the leader is experiencing a similar inner state regarding the event or issue at hand. When a leader is successful in creating feelings of similarity and togetherness with their

team, the mere communication of the leader's view of a situation will influence their team members to feel the same way (social tuning). This social tuning effect works to create a shared reality that keeps everyone on the same page and their motivations aligned to achieve company goals.

And when leaders can create a shared reality that aligns with company goals, they:

- Build trust in leadership
- Create interpersonal connections that extend influence
- Align of personal attitudes with leadership and with company objectives
- Achieve greater social and group coordination towards goal fulfilment

About Skyline Group

Skyline Group is the leading provider of scalable leadership solutions. C4X combines a flexible technology platform (integrated assessment, content, metrics, and coach management system) with the personalized impact and connection of 1:1 coaching. Learn more at www.SkylineG.com and www.C4X.com.