

Responsible leadership as whole-person learning and organisational development in practice

Vanessa Duckenfield, Head of Learning and Development at Bettys & Taylors Group

PROFILE

Vanessa Duckenfield has a BA Honours in Marketing and Management. At Bettys and Taylors, she became involved in people and cultural development roles, and eventually led the learning and development function of the organisation. In 2016, she became involved in the Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative (GRLI), and she is a board member and the chair of the Guardians Group of the organisation. Vanessa puts learning and relationships at the heart of what she does. She is passionate about role-modelling responsible values in her personal, family, and organisational life.

PRESENTATION BY VANESSA DUCKENFIELD

Putting relationships at the heart of what we do

Thank you all for the time to be here today. I'll start with a little bit about myself and then talk to you about the organisation I work within, Bettys & Taylors Group.

I did my undergraduate studies and joined Bettys & Taylors as a graduate. I entered the business in that phase of life when you are not quite sure what you want to do and therefore you take opportunities as they arise. Eventually, I was able to develop a learning and development function that now plays a key role in our strategic thinking and practice across the group.

I must say that my passion for responsible leadership not only comes from mentors but also from the life-changing journey that I have experienced in the company's radical leadership programme. The time to reflect deeply and become conscious of and curious about my own leadership approach was the catalyst that moved me from the typical HR technical grounding that I started with into working more in the organisational development space.

I live in the north of England, in a small market town called Knaresborough. It is very picturesque, very quaint, but at times it feels like its own little bubble from the rest of the world. Living in that same small town with a focus on family and connecting to the people around me, the GRLI and my involvement in it keeps me really connected to a world of peers with a passion for responsible leadership and gives me the opportunity to engage in open and honest dialogue that has the potential to shape a better future.

My life has changed dramatically over the last seven years since I married my husband and had my two children, Seth, who is now seven, and Fern, who is now four. Life is busy. I support my family while also helping my mum and my brother who support my dad who lives with early-onset dementia. In our free family time, we invest in time together – woodland walks, pancakes at the weekends, and lots of imaginative play.

But it is really relationships and putting that at the heart of what I do that is important to me and an important family value I hold. It is important for me to build rapport with people that I work with in my home life as well as in the working environment. Switching on the 'responsibility gene', something that was inspired by a conference I attended some years ago, is a focus for me and my family life.

As I have said, I am passionate about this topic, though it is a little bit daunting to speak openly to an

academic audience for the first time about my reflections. But hopefully, from the way that you have seen me introduce myself, you can start to experience me modelling some of what we are talking about in today's session – the concept of whole-person learning, being vulnerable, and the importance of how it has developed globally responsible leadership.

Bettys & Taylors Group is a 100-year-old independent family business, now in its fourth generation, and still as passionate about the finer things in life: refreshing cups of tea, delicious coffee, mouth-watering cakes, biscuits, and chocolate.

Since we were founded 100 years ago by Frederick Belmont, a Swiss confectioner, Bettys & Taylors is still a family-owned business. Now owned by the third and fourth generation, we are proud of our Swiss-Yorkshire roots and still committed to quality service and doing things properly.

Our purpose and values, the six Ps as we call them, underpin every decision we make and how we operate day to day. At the heart of our group purpose is to make a positive difference in the world and be a force for good.

Our values outline a commitment to a stakeholder model recognising dependencies in all of our stakeholders, whether they be customers, suppliers, people, communities, or the wider planet. We see long-term value in building sustainability and mutually beneficial relationships across all of these stakeholders.

Again, the word 'relationships' comes up. They are at the heart of how we work, and we continually strive to be a great place to work, where people love work and where everyone is encouraged to reach their potential and work collaboratively as peers and with shared leadership.

We work hard to embed these values and to make sure they are not just words on a page. We are learning all the time about where that works and where it does not work. But we also ensure that our people should share in the success and feel cared for and that they feel they work for a responsible business.

I have worked at Bettys & Taylors for most of my adult life. (For more information I encourage you to look at our [website](#).) For now, I will just talk about the last few years.

The pandemic has shown us just how much we have needed each other. Across the business we were quick to support the local communities, diverting food waste, raising funds, and delivering parcels of appreciation for frontline workers. It has also been another year of disruption to our supply base, emphasising the challenges that many tea and coffee-growing communities already face, such as low incomes, food insecurity, and poor healthcare.

However, we believe we have been able to provide some certainty and support in uncertain times with the launch of our five Covid supply chain commitments, which include supporting payment terms and access to credit, establishing a global emergency relief fund, and committing to longer-term contracts with our suppliers.

For our people, an area that I am leading on, we have put health and wellbeing first, closing our branches early before our government made decisions to close retail and being an early adopter of testing. We also established new ways of connecting with each other from face-to-face, an incredibly important part of our culture, to something virtual. How we sustain those team relationships, rapport, and dialogue has been something we have invested in.

Strong focus on organisational development

Now to the main topic, organisational development. I hope that you have been able to get a flavour

of what we do, albeit very briefly. We do believe that we are a special business, one with strong values and a family feel. Our aim is to work in a way that gives responsibility and trust in the people that need to do their job the best way that they can. In doing so, we believe this contributes to the ongoing success of the business and makes it feel like a great place to work for.

To enable the projects and initiatives like the ones I have just described to you, we realised our leaders are encouraged to create the conditions where individuals in their teams feel able to take responsibility and do things without needing to be told to by leadership.

For the last decade, we have been changing how we work and think within the organisation amidst a world facing some of the greatest transitions and challenges across our planet. We have not only been able to transition from a family leader to a new form of leadership, but we also did so in an increasingly demanding economic climate, a changing environmental context, and a crisis which some say is irreversible of diminishing and scarce resources.

When we shifted our approach to organisational development back in 2010, we still saw many people in significant roles in businesses and other sectors operating as business as usual, with little adaptation to how they were leading. Our view was that a heroic form of leadership and shaping the future would not provide us with the answers and ways forward that we felt were needed in an increasingly uncertain world. We, therefore, made the explicit decision that Bettys & Taylors would invest in its organisational development and in an approach to distributed leadership fitter for the future we were facing.

Our shareholders and key influencers created a family's vision and values, which is our lodestar to hold our security in changing times. They called for a future where people at all levels of the business would be modelling these values in practice every day, enabling a more flexible, free, responsible, and agile way of working within the parameters of a shared and compelling direction of travel.

Today, we continue to believe that more people taking more responsibility and contributing tangibly and voluntarily to influencing this direction of the business reduces the reliance on leadership from the top and enables the potential of individuals across the business to be released and realised.

How our values – passion, people, product, process, planet, and prosperity – live in the business and what they mean in practice are worked with consciously. It means we do not always get things right. We learn, we are vulnerable, we change things, we adapt, and we evolve. But it keeps us focused and keeps us conscious of how we want to be and what we want to achieve together.

What are the principles that we hold? These are the OD principles that guide our direction and development of the organisation. We integrate them into everything that we can, and they help to make explicit the principles that we are asking lots of people across our business to work with every day, particularly our strategic leaders.

- The way that we work models the future we want. We take an approach to do things that model the kind of outcomes that we want to see. If you want people to be engaged and if you want people to act in a particular way, we engage them in how we get there.
- We take a sustainable approach, considering future generations as our stakeholders. We can do this as a family business. We think longer term rather than short-term gains and we build that into how we review, measure, and evaluate.
- We are known through our values, and we ensure that people who work here develop those values by living them every day. We train people. We help people understand what their individual values are as soon as they join the organisation and we keep that steady thread of consciousness as they develop their careers with us.
- We value working together and contributing to the whole. We see that as far more valuable

than people doing their own thing. There is a time and a place for authority and people to take the lead. Additionally, how we contribute to the group and how our decisions inform the businesses that we have, the group, and how we want to be together are really important.

- We ensure there is sufficient alignment, even when there are conflicting needs. Relationships are important, but they are not just about niceness; they are about the robustness and the kind of open and honest conversation that is really needed. We do not shy away from that where we can, although sometimes we do find that quite tricky.
- Decisions around culture and ways of working and how we lead are conscious choices. We believe that co-creation creates commitment. This means that we consciously involve people in decisions that impact them and in the direction of future success. We hope this makes people more leaderful.
- We pay attention to relationships and recognise that we develop through them. We take a peer-based approach to our learning and development offer.
- We measure and evaluate performance against our values, paying attention both to what we are achieving, and to how we are achieving it too.

To live our OD principles in practice, people need to understand and take responsibility for and unlock their own energy and passion to integrate how we do things into their everyday work. We understand that people must open up, engage in dialogue, and learn to manage anxieties in a void where answers are difficult and hard to come by. We do this not to dominate, but to admit that sometimes we do not have the answers as leaders to the new difficulties that we are facing.

Asking great questions, being present, and sharing anxieties are excellent ways to start this. But the real breakthrough comes when we are trusted, and trust is built on shared experiences and successful results. It is our own responsibility to ensure we are skills and professionally fit for this journey, and that we can be vulnerable and not have all the answers and facilitate both our inner learning and learning between peers.

In 2020, our OD principles were brought to life for a wider audience in something that we coined 'The BTG Way'. The five expectations that we have of people across Bettys & Taylors were outlined in our expectations framework: be our best, be effective, be curious, be open and honest, and be responsible. We also have indicators of performance and of what is helpful, and what unhelpful behaviour looks like. But regardless of role, these five areas are at the heart of how we work together.

Our approach of whole-person learning

To support leaders and anybody in the business to live into these behaviours, we must support their learning and the way that they develop. We take a whole-person learning approach to do this, particularly with our leaders in the business.

What is whole-personal learning? To us, it is an approach to learning that is a hugely useful way of enabling individuals to begin to manage some of the complexities and ambiguity and ambivalence that inevitably arise when individuals are pursuing a variety of contending directions, and increasingly where groups of people need to come together to work out their priorities. They have to learn how to work together and integrate their needs, share time, and find useful ways of working things out. Power is exercised with people and not over them.

We think that the whole-person learning methodology provides the process through which people can become more self-aware and more self-generating, and therefore more able to use their power and authority appropriately, with awareness to facilitate what is needed from them and from others. At the heart of this approach is the commitment to collaboration, participation, learner self-direction, and unusual shift in forms of hierarchy and power in leadership roles.

The knowledge base and learning content are becoming obsolete more quickly, even more so now than it was ten years ago when these central arguments were formed. 'Learning how I learn' becomes increasingly important as the speed of change increases.

Due to the nature of change taking place, globalisation, and the complexity of issues, no single person, culture, point of view, or source of expertise has sufficient grounds for solutions. Learning is a joint venture. We must learn how we learn together and respond to each other's concerns.

For people to bring their different points of view and come together, and to realise potential synergies of a new way of learning, the setting needs to be based on equality and respect and consideration of the other. We are about facilitating the conditions in the business that enable this, where people can draw on their own experience and learning and build what is needed together.

As the name implies, whole-person learning is about all aspects of what it means to be human – feeling, senses, intuition, connection to others, as well as the more familiar ground around mind and intellect. Sometimes we talk about learning internally as learning with your head, heart, and soul. It is intimately linked with how people see themselves and how they view others.

Taking this approach to leadership development, and learning develops the confidence for leaders to understand themselves and be vulnerable. Here, vulnerability does not mean being weak or submissive. On the contrary, it implies the courage to be yourself. Opportunities for this vulnerability present themselves for us at work every day, and more so in the last few years of crisis through the pandemic.

Why do we feel more comfortable when someone around us is authentic and vulnerable? Because we are particularly sensitive to signs of the trustworthiness of our leaders. The depth of rapport and connection that can be realised through taking this approach across all people in our organisation invites differences to surface more readily and be dealt with creatively, including working through those unavoidable conflicts.

Our interactions may not always be polite with each other. We do not want that, but we do want them to be real. No matter how impassioned they are at times, they are characterised by a deep mutual sense of care and trust amongst peers. Sometimes in doing this, what emerges is the most surprising and demanding, turning out to be the most promising solution or strategy for whatever issue is under consideration. The collaboration is more fierce where relationships are robust and can be sustained through difficult conversations and challenges.

What is the impact that we want to see from following this approach? Increased equality with people being able to relate to each other in an equal manner. Honest and open discussion in debating the matter at hand. Whether it be at board meetings, staffing issues, or the development of the strategic plan, getting to the heart of the stuff is what matters. There must be clarity and communication for all involved so they can take their place in making action happen.

We also recognise that different perspectives have a real contribution. People feel free to say what they need to and to voice their concerns, and therefore feel like there is 'owned' decision-making. There is also a commitment to stand by what one agrees to do and what brings about results, so it is about moving to action. There is greater emotional intelligence as well. We believe that this is transferable to most situations where there are decisions, research, exploring differences, and learning new processes or topics. It builds into all that we do.

Developing our leaders

Let us look at the individual and what that means for their development in practice. The strength and gravitas of leadership do come from within. It requires personal authenticity – strength of

relationships and the courage to act. With our leaders, we talk about making a real difference and it is starting with them, their skills, their abilities, and their characteristics.

For our leadership development to be fully effective, we create the space that leaders need to challenge themselves and their leadership and management skills training and keep their learning on the radar. That is what we think real leadership is. Whether they are exploring systems, leadership styles, or culture, this inside-out approach to leadership management skills training enables people to focus on themselves and realise their internal power and authority, which means they can therefore enact external change.

Over the 15 years, alongside our partners Oasis, we are also a founding partner of the GRLI, we have pioneered a different kind of leadership development training programme, encouraging people to lead with courage, vision, and integrity.

On our RASCAL programme, the leaders will reflect deeply on their established strengths, unlearn those unhelpful behaviours holding them back, and bring to the fore underutilised or even unrecognised abilities from within. We believe if we only focused on leadership development in work activities, we would lose the opportunity for people to learn more about their broader strengths and weaknesses. So, we encourage people to learn through their experiences, talking about how their relationships develop both inside and outside of work, and what it means for them as a whole person.

What does the programme enable? On RASCAL, our leaders identify those personal challenges that are meaningful to them and valuable for the company, focusing on the three levels of I, we, and all of us so that they can work on and grow these with their peers. They consider both the professional and personal development they need to be a high-performing leader. So, it is not just what they know, but how they work with others, within an environment of distributed leadership, as I have described.

They are enabled to work on personal strengths and areas of development consciously, and they experience a peer-learning approach, which is about creating a peer group of trusted peers who care enough about their development areas to support them, challenge them, but most importantly, hold them to account.

They are encouraged to develop a mindset of learning where practices become habits. This is not about learning new stuff; it is about changing the way you are and how you are being. They work with our frameworks and our approaches to do this and strive to be their best. But really, it is about the quality time and space to think about their leadership approach and how they need to act to deliver success – with peer feedback, challenge and ‘holding the mirror up’ along the way.

The value of coaching

Alongside training developments with groups of peers, we also invest in coaching sustained over time. This goes beyond traditional performance coaching. Our approach to one-to-one development helps people find ways to address their own needs through reflection and dialogue with one coach or another.

Fundamental again is our partnership with Oasis. Ten years into our scheme being realised, there are now 25 Oasis and internally trained coaches working with clients on a one-to-one basis at every level of the business. Whether it is retail, catering, front-of-house, senior leadership, or middle management, anybody can access this scheme to make a difference.

Over 250 people have participated in this coaching programme, and we are seeing at least a 30% uplift in people accessing this service year after year. We also have external executive development for those for whom it might prove more difficult to work with an internal coach. One-on-one support is open to all, and objectives do not have to be specific to people’s jobs or individual roles. Coaches have

helped people through life transitions, career changes, parental leave and planning for retirement through developing new skills or behaviours, working on challenging relationships, or simply having time to step back.

One coach who works with us commented that it is far more valuable for an individual to be supported to find their own best response to a solution rather than being directed towards one. Another feedback we get from this team highlights how coaches instil cultural behaviours and beliefs in that one-to-one relationship so that more people act with these values at the heart of their decision-making. It helps people to be more open and honest, and it afforded them the freedom to act in a peer-based way with colleagues.

Beyond the immediate benefits, the programme has brought back multiple benefits from an organisational development perspective too. It is about building a culture of strong relationships, self-awareness, self-initiating behaviours, and a deeper connection with the business's purpose and values – even though we recognise we are on a journey, of course. There are lots more to do with this scheme. But as we celebrate its tenth birthday, we are invested in another ten years for sure.

We also ensure that our internal coaches receive professional supervision to make sure their practice and their learning remain fresh, and they are enabled and equipped to support people in the best way that they can. We also ensure that the coaches are enabled and equipped to handle the inevitable conflicts that may arise when you are supporting people in the business that you work within.

Giving people time to think

To think is cited as a key benefit. Giving people time to think helps them to be more efficient and more effective. If people take time to think, it can help them understand change and how it impacts them. They can therefore work with the change more effectively. If people can take time to think about change, it can help them to be less resistant to it.

If people are feeling busy and stressed, as a lot of our colleagues are saying they are feeling, particularly in these times, it can help them to sharpen up their ability to prioritise, stop things, and focus on what is needed. Space and time can help people refresh; it can energise them for new challenges. Time to think can support the self-led career development and ongoing learning that we strive for across the business.

For me, taking a whole-person approach to my leadership development is absolutely life-changing. I feel more confident to ask questions, speak truth to power when I need to, listen properly to my team, admit when I am wrong, learn from failure, and support my well-being.

Experience has shown me that to be an effective leader you do need to be yourself. It is not about copying unsustainable, heroic ideals of how leaders should be. The strength, gravitas, and direction of real leadership come from within, as I have said, and if you can bring your whole self to that endeavour, it supports them in every part of life.

For me, I was living with 'be strong' and 'be perfect' drivers. I think the first piece of feedback I got in the business was, 'You're a bit like a textbook. It doesn't feel like I know you. You talk the technical talk, but I don't actually relate to you as a human being.' Quite brutal feedback at the time, but I do not think I realised it back then.

I felt I needed to give the answers to show my credibility as a leader. I had to tell people what they needed to do in various situations to show that I had power. Particularly during that time working as a female in a predominantly male operations environment, I had to know the answers. It was part of what I needed to be as a leader.

The programme taught me and enabled me to become more comfortable with listening, unlocking, and distributing my responsibility, understanding the different types of interventions I make as a leader, and how I bring a difference to my leadership approach by being aware of what is needed.

The whole-person learning approach has supported me to cope, be bolder in my decision-making, including very big decisions that I have made in my personal life as well as my working life, and recognise and build on strengths. Most importantly, I put people at the heart of how I do this, nurture their potential and recognise that in others.

Q&A

Question: On the one hand, you are talking about the continuity of the family business and the culture. On the other hand, you are talking about the need for change in some of those things. I wonder if you could say a bit more about how those two are related and how it is held by people.

Ms Duckenfield: I use the term around understanding how our past inspires our future. We talk a lot about the founding values and whether they are the right values for the future. I think the main thing for us is knowing the story: What has been the story for now, and how do we keep that story alive and relevant?

We celebrated our 100th year and we created a big focus in the business around this story: This is where we come from, this is our why. We share those stories about our leaders who just had this within them. They had a values-based way of leading and putting people at the heart of the business. There were some things that we did want to change to continue to be a sustainable family business, for example our leadership approach and style of development.

So, it is about knowing the story, articulating that story, and having storytellers in the business to keep the fire lit, but also about looking through the lens of it and asking: Is that right for the future? Where are we heading? What do we want to sustain? What do we want to resign to the past and what do we want to bring fresh into the future?

We do that regularly as part of our future-picture process. That is our strategy cycle where we look at what the future holds and describe in a word or picture what it looks and feels like. This keeps us focused on what we are aiming to achieve, whilst creating space for new learning to be reviewed and for plans to be altered as the context changes. That would be it in summary!

Question: I am interested in hearing more about generational differences in business. While you have young and new ones coming, you also have those who have been working for Bettys & Taylors for a long time. Is there a change or is there a difference between the generations?

Ms Duckenfield: Whilst we had different flavours of leadership throughout the historic 100 years, the dominant leadership style was quite parental. We have had very inspirational leaders that said, 'This is what I think you should do', shared really good ideas, worked really on their intuition, and so people did what they asked.

When we first started our organisational journey in about 2010, there was a real concerted effort to support the development of the people who brought the business to the place where it had got to by that point. We invested heavily in their leadership development first.

All our leaders in significant roles were invited to attend, and we invested in a number of programmes with very honest discussions that whole-person learning and leading in a distributed way is going to take something from you and going to require you to act differently. But we will support you to develop and unlearn unhelpful behaviours and relearn, and we will give you time to do that.

By doing that, we have been able to build champions that really shifted who they are because of that

development, including me. I would not have led in the way that I lead now because of that. But it also meant some people did not want to work that way. They wanted more guidance. They did not like the openness and the focus on self-reflection at first.

That was a historic piece. In terms of what we do with our new starters coming in now, and this is multi-generational, we observe aspiring graduates through to people who are looking for a life change. We get quite a lot of people coming to our business because they want to change the type of work they do.

We hold a peer-based induction programme which starts to build on the kind of leadership qualities that are going to be needed at Bettys & Taylors. It helps people to orientate and transition from what leadership has looked like in other businesses where they have needed to perhaps shift how they operate.

Resources

The Bettys and Taylors website: <https://www.bettysandtaylor.co.uk/>

The Bettys and Taylors responsible business hub:
<https://www.bettysandtaylor.co.uk/category/responsible-business/>

Bryce Taylor – Whole Person Learning: <https://grii.org/resources/whole-person-learning-bryce-taylor/>

The Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative (GRLI): <https://grii.org/>

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