



## Guru Interview: Emmanuel Gobillot

Emmanuel Gobillot discusses the need for 'connected' leaders who engage with employees in relationships based on trust and meaningful dialogue.

**Interview by Sarah Powell**

**Emmanuel Gobillot is Director of Leadership Services for Hay Group. His major interests are change and innovation and his interventions are focused on creating the capability in organizations to deliver results through innovation and world-class leadership.**

Mr Gobillot has worked with the BBC, Philips, BT, ITV, the United Nations and Belron to develop their senior executive capability and make their organizations more effective. His work on leadership development, innovation, growth and culture change facilitation has also been used by organizations such as Royal & Sun Alliance, Carlsberg and Lloyds TSB.

His book *The Connected Leader – Creating Agile Organizations for People, Performance and Profit* was published by Kogan Page (London) in 2006.

In this interview, Mr Gobillot argues that to deliver results leaders must engage employees in relationships based on trust and meaningful dialogue – mirroring the social relationships that people foster outside the workplace.

He emphasizes the need for leaders to cultivate self-awareness so that they can gauge the impact they have on employees and customers, explores the barriers to being a 'connected' leader and the difference between good and great leaders.

Mr Gobillot also explains that performance-related pay runs the risk of employees becoming reward rather than goal-oriented and stresses how important it is for leaders to satisfy employees' desire for meaning, belonging and recognition in their work.

**In *The Connected Leader* you emphasize that the current ‘people economy’ demands a network-based form of leadership, rooted in relationships and focusing on co-creation of ‘a community of value’. This appears both inspiring but also more challenging than adherence to traditional, formal organizational structures. What are the main imperatives?**

**Emmanuel Gobillot:**

This is an interesting question because, on the face of it, the assumption made in your question is correct: this form of leadership does appear challenging in the workplace. But, if we think of our relationships outside work, we can see that it is, in fact, quite simple. The main challenge is the re-socialization of the workplace to mirror how we relate to others outside the workplace, which is much more efficient. In business we typically try to make organizations efficient by introducing rules, roles and incentives. But this is not an effective way for human beings to behave, whether relating to employees or consumers.

The critical success factor in an organization is how we can capture all the energy of all individuals involved, both inside and outside the organization. That is impossible within the current organizational set-up. The formal confines of an organization limit our ability to behave normally because we have introduced rules of relationship. So for me the main imperative, and this requires talent, is how do you regain confidence in relationships within the organization? The main challenge to this is in our minds. We’ve learned as executives that the efficient way to run an organization is through roles and rules. We’re missing considerable potential by adopting this approach.

**Can a socializing leadership style be learned if it does not come naturally, and does it not require an extraordinary capacity for self-awareness to gauge the level, strength and potential of accumulated trust?**

**Emmanuel Gobillot:**

There has always been a question mark over this question of authenticity in terms of leadership. The whole idea of developing a style or talent suggests aspiring to be something that you’re not – indicating a lack of authenticity. In effect this is linked to your question about self-awareness.

I believe it is possible to develop awareness of your impact and the result of this in terms of whether people make a choice to follow you or not. Such awareness will result either in a sense of satisfaction or one of dissatisfaction. If dissatisfaction is sufficiently strong, and you can envisage the benefits of a positive impact, then, provided you know the practical steps to take,

you will be able to change, developing a new leadership style. This said I do not advocate that leaders follow a ‘recipe’ – what I am proposing is a way to enable leaders to understand themselves and to make choices in how they behave.

This, of course, will be easier for some than for others. The key question is: what is the fear that prevents such change? In my work I have come across many people who fail to develop a particular style because they’re afraid of the result; they fear that it might be unsuccessful. However, I believe that once leaders have self-awareness and can dismiss fears of ‘what if. . .?’, they are more likely to succeed. After all, most executives who have reached senior levels of the organization must at some stage have done something right in terms of relationships within the organization – so why should it be impossible for others? One problem perhaps is that the idea of a more ‘socializing’ style of leadership is seen as somehow ‘soft’ – this is unhelpful.

Coming back to your question about self-awareness and the idea of leaders building up a ‘trust account’ – yes, you’re right, it requires an enormous capacity for self-awareness and it’s almost something that you have to do consciously. I’ve actually suggested to leaders with whom I have worked that they should draw up a statement each month to analyse what they have done recently that would have given them credit in such an ‘account’ and what they might have ‘spent’. That helps them to understand the dynamic of trust and how people relate to them. There is no doubt that this exercise requires considerable awareness and considerable honesty.

As mentioned, the main barriers to being a ‘connected leader’ are fear that things will go wrong, and lack of self-awareness. There is also the intrinsic belief, which comes through years of leadership education, in roles, rules, accountabilities, pay and all such formal elements. We’re very well educated in the formal elements of an organization but we don’t quite understand the social elements. I believe the biggest single barrier to success is the fact that, when leaders come in to work, they are no longer the person they were when they were having breakfast with their family. That’s rather strange and, until we understand that, our titles mean little more than a set of responsibilities. Titles don’t confer any more power or intelligence. All they bring us are contacts. Once we recognize this and have a different picture in our minds of what great leadership is, then I believe the barriers will start to disappear. So self-awareness is key. The more we understand about topics such as the emotional or social intelligence that Daniel Goleman talks about, the more we realize

that, without self-awareness, little can be achieved.

**Why should ‘the very actions that ensure good leadership’ be ‘the ones that will stop you from being a great leader’?**

**Emmanuel Gobillot:**

It’s all about focus. It’s all about good leadership. Aspiring to be ‘good’ leaders we have learned to focus inside the organization on our teams, our processes, and our situation. We’ve learned the art of ‘situational’ leadership which means we identify a situation and then come up with an answer with or without the help of others.

***“We know that there exist powerful players in organizations who, to pursue their own personal agendas, will try to hinder efforts to change. The choice is either to accept and work with such situations or to try to overcome them.”***

The problem is that the world has changed beyond ‘situations’. Great leaders are able to anticipate changes of context, which are broader than one situation. They are complete shifts in the way that business is happening. I believe we are going through one of those changes and, if we carry on being ‘good’ leaders, we’ll miss it. We’ll miss the change in what our customers and employees are expecting of us. The problem is that most of our development and understanding is still rooted in a simple arrangement of employees, customers and suppliers – and we’ve codified that world and are comfortable with it. I am challenging this view and saying that I don’t think that world exists any more – that world is changing. You can carry on being a ‘good’ leader, but you will fail and you will never become the great leader who managed to anticipate those context changes and build some resilience.

**How can a leader avoid ‘a clash between the organizational and individual agenda’?**

**Emmanuel Gobillot:**

This is a fundamental question and it comes back to the issue of fear. One of the big fears as regards networks and relationships inside organizations is that they do not necessarily mirror what the organization wants. We know that there exist powerful players in organizations who, to pursue their own personal agendas, will try to

hinder efforts to change. The choice is either to accept and work with such situations or to try to overcome them. The problem with networks is that you cannot overcome them. You can’t tame a network – all you can hope to do is to work with it.

My belief, as I tell the leaders with whom I work, is that this need not lead to clashes. If there are such clashes this is because we are operating within this traditional model of employees, customers, rules and roles – this creates clashes. When behaviour in an organization follows lines of reciprocity and moral obligation, and there is purpose and vision and discussion of aspirations and needs, then these problems are more likely to be overcome – in fact they are less likely to occur in the first place. When people understand a purpose, they will co-operate and will work with you rather than trying to avoid the tasks given to them.

On the face of it your question rightly suggests a massive challenge but, actually, working within that network pretty much answers the challenge. Within a network people know leaders recognize their existence and are open to dialogue. If they are not recognized then there is unlikely to be dialogue – hence the challenge.

**Is the agility of an organization dependent on it being a ‘real’ organization, i.e. are these indivisible as two parts of one uniquely context-sensitive organization?**

**Emmanuel Gobillot:**

I believe it is dependent. It is the only way an organization can react quickly. I’ll offer a practical example: if you have a process in place and somebody’s accountable for that process, they’re unlikely to change it, even if it doesn’t work well – accountability simply ensures that it works. However, in the case of a ‘real’ organization and real dialogue, the person responsible is more likely to look beyond the set of accountabilities, seeing that his or her role extends further than simply ensuring the process works.

**You make a powerful argument for organizations to fulfil employees’ yearning for ‘meaning’ and ‘belonging’ through recognition of their personal goals and aspirations rather than ‘bribery’. Will performance-related rewards still play a role?**

**Emmanuel Gobillot:**

There is still a place for performance-related rewards but we need to understand and use them to best effect and outcome. Performance-related pay, as novelist Douglas Coupland has pointed out, can lead people to mistake the reward for the goal. For me that sums up a problem with

performance-related pay. We're going astray if we make the reward the primary driver.

My argument for recognition of personal goals and aspirations will, I believe, enhance engagement across the board. In my book I suggest turning Abraham H. Maslow's hierarchy of needs upside down – putting the pyramid on its head as it were. I believe we've made a major mistake in assuming that people at the bottom of an organization don't need to be engaged because all they are interested in is money – meaning all the organization needs to do is identify the appropriate level of pay. This idea is still unfortunately all too common in organizations, i.e. the belief that some people are somehow less important, less engaged than others. Everybody has aspirations and needs to be engaged. So for me the goal is to promote enhanced job satisfaction for all.

I also have a problem with leaders seeking 'self-starters' or 'self-motivated' individuals – an idea that is widely promoted in newspaper articles, recruitment ads and so on. To me, to state a candidate must be self-motivated suggests that I, as the employer, can't be bothered to motivate my staff.

The point is that everyone is 'motivated'. The key is to understand and tap into that motivation so as to fulfil the organization's purpose. This can't be done through a plan. Nobody gets engaged by a plan, even if it facilitates engagement. What engages people is recognizing a purpose and seeing themselves within that purpose – and there must be clarity about this in terms of meaning, of knowing what is expected, understanding one's job, seeing how this contributes to the bigger picture and how one can go beyond that. A simple explanation of accountabilities is insufficient – it's a flawed approach and it is this that leads to a lack of productivity because it limits potential engagement.

It's easy in an organization to coerce somebody into doing something. The challenge is to get someone to go beyond that compliance into real engagement, and that you can only achieve if there is sufficient clarity in the workplace about the organization's purpose.

**Establishing a new, 'real' company with a meaning- and relationship-based focus seems reasonably straightforward. However, changing the culture of an existing, traditional top-down organization would seem a daunting challenge. How would you recommend achieving this?**

**Emmanuel Gobillot:**

I think you're right. Establishing a new 'real' company would seem easier, particularly

because many of the ideas of purpose, trust, meaning, dialogue are easier when you're founding a company because you have purpose and meaning and you can have dialogue if the organization is sufficiently small. Of course, as organizations grow this becomes more and more difficult. However, it is possible. What is important is for everybody to start behaving differently towards that network of relationships. This starts with leaders who understand that they must recognize the network as an integral part of their organization.

One of the reasons why I talk about formal and 'real' organizations is because I want to ensure that leaders understand that the network of relationships, the 'real' organization, is part of what they must lead; it is not a distraction but an integral part of the organization. Recognition of this is the first step in understanding how we can achieve it.

Rather than focusing on the networks themselves, which runs the risk of executives indulging in social network analysis and formalizing the real organization – which would be counter-productive – I encourage leaders to focus on where the energy in the organization lies. What kind of energy is there? Where are things going well? Where is the energy blocked? Leaders need to move away from plan and structure to identify the nature of the energy in the organization, where there needs to be change, and the potential of their personal impact in achieving this. An advantage of networks is that they have this amazing ability to make things 'viral', spreading them rapidly. Change in a network environment is faster than in a formal environment – it won't necessarily be easier to start with, but once underway it moves far faster.

**Is there a case study you would cite as a particularly good example of an individual or organization which has thrived as a result of connected leadership?**

**Emmanuel Gobillot:**

While it's easy to name individuals who have done extremely well, what is harder to find – perhaps because the whole idea and the whole concept of connected leadership is relatively new – is an entire organization that has done well. Google is probably one. An organization that I have worked closely with and that I believe is also a good example is Belron, the global leader in vehicle glass replacement and repair and holding company for Autoglass and Carglass and others. There is certainly something 'different' about this company under the leadership of Gary Lubner, whose approach to doing business is an excellent example of connected leadership; the organization is certainly doing well as a result.

Gary's approach is all about understanding that relationships matter. Everything that's good, bad and ugly about relationships is thrown into the pot and something marvellous comes out of it. At Belron it's all about focus on the individual.

Google focuses on recruiting particularly talented individuals. Microsoft went through a similar process a few years ago, although the challenge there was how to retain talented employees who had become millionaires through the company's success. How, after all, do you make a millionaire want to get out of bed? Microsoft determined that the only way to do it was through creating connected leadership disciplines. The problem with Microsoft was that this wasn't systemic. Some individuals managed far better than others. I believe Google is trying to make this approach systemic.

The public sector is a particularly good environment for connected leadership. Given its overlapping responsibilities, the sector was designed for collaborative leadership, and this eventually becomes connected leadership. School networks are a particularly good example. And now we can see an entire industry, the social entrepreneurship industry, that is adopting this approach. Because there is such strength of purpose embedded within the social entrepreneurship movement, leaders naturally aspire to be connected leaders. □

*You can order [The Connected Leader – Creating Agile Organizations for People, Performance and Profit](#) from [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).*

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