

Mentoring and the leadership deficit

In a world where exponential change affects almost every aspect of our lives and environment, the way we lead organizations and how we develop leaders for the future is not immune. What worked in leadership even a decade ago, let alone 50 years ago, is increasingly less functional now. Yet many political, commercial and many other structures cling to obsolete models of leadership that are now part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

The term “the leadership deficit” emerged out of a series of webinars with leaders across the world. The leaders, who gain the headlines, are increasingly those who sow division and polarisation, who take short-term perspectives and are driven by narcissistic and all too often psychopathic personalities. The current turmoil in the United States and the frequent collapses of once-proud companies are in large the consequence of the failure of leaders to provide moral direction or to see beyond the immediate consequences of their actions and decisions. What’s lacking, in particular, is *wisdom*.

And this is where mentoring comes in. The word mentor appears first in the Odyssey, nearly 3,000 years ago. Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom, used her wisdom to help King Odysseus and his son Telemachus develop wisdom of their own. In a series of dialogues, whenever they had a bruising experience, she helped them reflect and learn. Gradually, they became more complete, humane leaders. The French cleric, Fenelon, just a few centuries ago, developed this tradition of learning dialogue to establish modern mentoring – along with Machiavelli, his writings were the foundations of modern leadership. Yet the leadership competencies today’s organizations are so fond of almost never emphasise wisdom – they are, in large part, about form not substance.

What’s needed in today’s leadership?

I define the leadership deficit as *the gap between the intelligent, humane and far-sighted leadership the world needs and the demonstrated behaviours of those in leadership positions*. I see three major themes for making leadership fit for the future. These are:

- The ability to move from linear to systemic thinking
- Develop the traits and characteristics that underlie wise leadership
- The shift from leadership as an individual competence to a collective competence

From linear to systemic thinking

The difference between linear and systemic thinking can be summed up as follows:

- Fixing the problem, versus understanding the context
- Maintaining control, versus enabling and empowering
- Finding discreet solutions, versus interconnected solutions
- Focus on predicted or predictable outcomes, versus emergent and evolving outcomes
- Static processes and procedures, versus evolving processes

- Hierarchical communication, versus unbounded communication
- Seeking certainty, versus living with uncertainty.

Leaders, who adhere to the former characteristic in each of these pairs, are doomed to fail in an environment of rapid change. The more they seek certainty by trying to control, the more uncontrollable the system becomes. This can be seen, for example, in the area of human resources. Repeated surveys show that senior leadership has little or no confidence in their organizations' succession planning or talent management (even most HR people have little confidence in these processes). The reason? These processes aim to exert linear control over a complex, adaptive system.

By contrast, intelligent leadership increasingly recognises that, for organizations to thrive, they must work with the wider systems of which they are a part. Enhancing the health and functionality of the wider system is key to creating the environment where their organizations can flourish.

The core traits of wise leadership

There are over four million erudite texts about leadership, each of them with different assumptions and conclusions. A while ago I set myself the task of extracting common themes from literature that addressed the key qualities of an ideal twenty-first century leader. I found four themes and the face validity of these has been reinforced in workshops, webinars and other interactions with thousands of leaders around the world.

- **Compassion.** Compassion is a much more positive and useful trait than empathy. Empathy is about feeling *with* someone, and can easily lead to emotional overload, distancing and in extreme, desensitization. Compassion is feeling *for* another person and brings with it the desire to alleviate their pain. Key components of compassion are self-awareness, kindness, self-compassion, acceptance and equanimity. In a current study of high performing teams, one of the key observations is that the leaders of these teams tend to have a much greater sense of personal security than their counterparts in less successful teams. They have confidence both in themselves and in others, are forgiving of mistakes (their own or other people's) and, because they have trust in themselves, are able to extend trust to others, empowering them to take decisions and self-manage.
- **Curiosity.** Curiosity incorporates creativity, for an incurious mind does not easily put concepts together to generate new ideas. Curiosity causes us to explore our inner worlds (why and how do I think, feel, behave and function?), how we interface with the world outside of us, and how that world itself functions. Key components of curiosity include mindfulness, higher order reasoning, and learning orientation.
- **Courage.** Courage is the capacity to do the right thing, while being aware of the personal and wider risks. Key components of courage include clarity of one's own values, a deep sense of ethicality, being positively self-critical, being able to let go and move on, resilience to setbacks. Courage also encompasses the will to work with dreams (generated or espoused through Curiosity) until they become reality. It allows us to take tough decisions, to have conversations and to avoid dealing with

issues we would rather avoid, and to behave in ways closer to the person we aspire to be.

- **Connectedness.** The South African word *ubuntu* (meaning “I am because we are”) sums this up well. Connectedness is about how we relate both emotionally and intellectually to the people and causes beyond our immediate horizons.

In another study, one of the world’s largest high technology companies asked me to research the characteristics of their highest performing teams globally. The leaders of those teams consistently showed the following traits:

- Leaders, who are secure in themselves, don’t feel the need to control. It is relatively easy for them to trust others, because if mistakes happen, they have big enough shoulders to share responsibility.
- They recognise that trying to manage a large team is an impossible and fruitless task. Rather, they aim to support team members in managing themselves.
- These leaders don’t expect to be kept informed about everything, or to re-route information between members of the team. Instead, they expect team members to ensure communication happens between them and to tell the manager, when there is something he or she needs to know.
- These leaders see part of their role as protecting the team from distractions from outside; equally important is ensuring that everyone understands and is aligned with the overarching team goals.
- Their self-security makes them open to (and welcoming of) feedback from team members. They have a “growth mindset” – focused equally on their own development and that of the team.
- They *care* – both about the team goals, but also about each of the team members as individuals. They make time for human interaction.
- They are aware that they, too, are a work in progress and they are fully comfortable with that perception.

From individual to collective leadership

The persistence of the one-leader model is due at least in part to a number of common, but unevicenced assumptions:

- That leadership is an individual characteristic. Many of the popular books about leadership take the perspective that leaders are people, who have particular combinations of personality factors and behaviours that enable them to motivate others, through their charisma, energy, personal example and/or ability to articulate the ambitions of those they lead. While that may to an extent be true, it is only a one-dimensional view of the leadership dynamic. Academic literature talks of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), recognising that leadership is a *systemic* process, in which the qualities of the leader and the led are both essential ingredients in success and failure.
- That some people have what it takes to lead and others don’t. Again, most of the evidence suggests that the attributes and characteristics of effective leaders differs according to situation.

- That individuals make better decisions than groups. Both individuals and groups can be decisive or indecisive. While groups may be more subject to groupthink, individuals can be even more inflexible and unable to see the obvious.
- That leaders provide direction. While that may sometimes be true, it is at least equally often the case that leaders articulate and clarify the sense of direction that is already there. They go with the wave rather than create it.
- If you don't have a leader, things fall apart. The experiments with semi-autonomous work groups in the 1970s and 1980s convincingly demonstrated that this is not necessarily so. Moreover, some of the most important innovations in modern society – such as the internet – have emerged without leaders. What they have had instead is *instigators*. Instigators often demonstrate innovation and energy, but show little desire to lead, at least in the sense of wanting to control how things develop. They work on the assumption that, if an idea (or meme) is sufficiently powerful, people will adopt it.

In a VUCA world, the role of a leader as the person, who makes all the key decisions, for others to carry out, is simply unsustainable. Leaders with this style work longer and longer hours, while accomplishing less and less and always being behind the curve of change in their environment. If, as described above, the role of a leader is to create the environment, where people can lead themselves, then it is time to replace the concept of *being the leader* with one of *devolved leadership*. In my international workshops, I often ask people to define the tasks and roles in their teams, where leadership is required. Then we explore which of these aspects of leadership can only be done effectively and solely by a designated authority figure. The answer is just two:

- Being the signatory for allocation of resources and permissions from above
- Protecting the team from interference, so it can get on with its job.

We also explore the difference between *delegation* (an exercise in power by the leader) and *shared allocation of responsibility* (collective decision-making by the team as a whole about who should exercise leadership and when).

Leaders can only create the time and reflective space they need to step back from frenetic doing, if they are prepared to accept the help of their team.

How do we create the leaders we need for tomorrow?

There are roles here for both today's leaders and Human Resources. For HR, the challenge is firstly to create flexible, employee driven systems of talent management that genuinely promote diversity of thinking and perspective; and secondly to find ways to enable *wise leaders* to be recognised and supported, rather than be drowned in the flood of self-seeking, short-term opportunists.

For today's leaders, an immediate challenge is: "How can I mentor the next generation of leaders, so that they are wiser than me?" Beyond that, "What kind of a role model do I want to be to generations, which have not yet entered the workforce?"

Equally important is how they select who they will mentor. Sociopaths rise to the top through flattery and creating the illusion of making things happen. An emerging core competence is the ability to distinguish between those people, who are ambitious for a cause and those, who are ambitious for themselves – the wisdom to see into the “soul”. This isn’t easy, but leaders can learn. Among the consequences of not learning this perspicacity is that you only find out things are going badly wrong, when it is too late!

It helps to seek their own mentors (and coaches), who can help them develop the skills of self-honesty that will help them grow in compassion, courage, curiosity and connection. Great mentors help us remember who we are and the legacy that we want to leave to future generations; they create the space, where we can reconnect with the values that make us human; and they support us in discovering our wiser selves. Among the ways, in which they support leaders in becoming wiser are:

- Directing attention to the wider systems influenced by executive decisions
- Helping the leader see themselves more accurately as a role model
- Enabling the leader to think through the ethics of decisions
- Helping them become more self-aware and self-honest
- Helping them articulate and develop their values and how they apply them

There is one simple starting point for any CEO or President that they can implement immediately. It is to reshape how they and others define their roles from “the guy in charge” to Mentor-in-Chief. The world needs more Ambassadors for Wisdom!

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