The Process of Leadership

The concept and values of leadership have developed greatly over the past century.

Beginning with the horrendous loss of life that arose out of the impact of aristocratic leadership on the battlefields of the Western Front, we have since seen it progress through leadership by example based on the qualities of some of the great leaders in the Second World War, to the 'decisiveness under pressure' of the early space programme – termed 'The Right Stuff' in the 1983 film of that name. Essentially, the last century has witnessed a transition from leadership as a right to leadership as a responsibility.

However, for many years, this responsibility was very much entangled with the concept of the Alpha-Male, and the idea of power and invulnerability, and it has taken a number of high-profile disasters *(some of which were famously reported in 'The Wrong Stuff' documentary into pilot error and air disasters)* to get us to the idea that an effective leader is someone who gets the best out of their people, not someone who has all the best within themselves. This idea was neatly expanded in Collins and Porras' research into the qualities of leadership that create sustainable outperformance, and their surprising conclusion of the role of humility in these 'Level 5 Leaders'.

And now we have come to a place where, while a few well-known (and sometimes highly publicised) individuals still effect their leadership in directive and autocratic ways, most of us are looking at their situation and wondering what problems and issues are festering underneath them, and how many people within their structures have simply had their potential either suffocated out of them, or had it subverted into political behaviours.

But, while we appreciate there are different leadership styles, there is still a tendency in many people to balk at the idea of a 'process' of leadership. It is almost as though we still want to believe that leadership is simply an innate

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quality we possess, an individual aspect of our character, a natural trait. For some reason, many of us don't like the idea that there may be something methodical in leadership.

And yet, as the concept of leadership has matured and grown richer over the last 100 years, there are patterns observable in good leadership which can now be seen to be different to those in poor leadership, there are sequences of interaction which are more likely to build commitment in our people than other sequences, and there are situations we can construct which inspire creative expression and objective analysis and situations which don't – and books, papers and stories of best practice are full of these. And so there is a process of leadership. It is a process which sits above all that is happening, seeing patterns in what is going on, and can flex to what is needed.

But its ability to flex depends on the variety of options that you are capable of using. It depends on the range of tools and techniques that are at your disposal. It depends on the richness of your understanding of best practices and patterns that have proven successful in similar situations. And sadly, for many leaders, in many situations, this richness of variety extends barely further than presentation, debate and instruction.

That may sound a little harsh. We are after all training our leaders in a whole range of approaches to get the best out of their people; approaches which are based on a good understanding of what leadership is. We are equipping them with skills in visioning, in coaching, in counselling, in appraisal, in appreciative enquiry, in problem solving, in process mapping, in diversity, in relationship building. They have more understanding of the elements that make an effective leader than any generation of leaders before them.

And yet, the key vehicle for delivering that leadership remains stubbornly unchanged. The primary mechanism for

enabling their practical application of all of that richness of understanding remains a place which extends barely further than presentation, debate and instruction. It is a place where people predominantly sit around a table, watch a screen, and listen to opinion, for while our understanding of leadership has advanced massively in the last thirty years, our approach to meetings is still steeped in practices which hark back to mediaeval times and before.

Which is strange, because during the 1970s and 80s, many tools were developed to support more participative styles of leadership. In Japan, they developed 'The Seven Management and Planning Tools'; in the West, we adopted a range of participative tools for problem solving; and people like de Bono developed creativity tools which could be used in team situations; and the development of such tools has continued to grow and adapt ever since. And yet, beyond basic brainstorming, it is rare to see any of these tools applied in meetings – in fact it is rare to see any tools beyond presentation, debate and instruction used in meetings.

Part of the problem is the environment in which we usually hold meetings. The central table with everybody seated around it; the leader at one end with a flipchart and large screen does not lend itself

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to easy application of these tools, and so anybody wishing to go against decades of culture not only has to face down the natural cynics, those who don't like change, and those who have a vested interest in the current power balance, they have to move furniture, clear wall space, and force everybody up one end of the room. Not an easy thing to 'try out as an experiment'. We almost need a 'skunkworks' where the normal rules of meetings are suspended, and where it is easy to develop and prove these alternative meeting tools, and where we can win people over to them and build the confidence and commitment (and physical changes) that are necessary to carry them successfully back over to our 'normal' meetings.

And then along comes virtual meetings. Web-based meetings are that 'skunkworks'. They do not conform particularly well to the conventions of physical meetings, and as a result they tend to deliver a somewhat inferior result out of presentation, debate and instruction. They lack a central table and the visual contact that is key to controlling people's engagement in that sort of process. But they have unlimited virtual space, and scope for trying new things, and a need for leadership approaches which inspire participation.

The technology available for web-based meetings between PCs and over the internet makes it possible to implement and use the whole range of tools and techniques to support participative leadership. Any element of the Management and Planning Tools, problem solving tools, and creativity tools can easily be set up, and the nature of collaboration software on the web means that people can engage with these quickly and evenly. The move to virtual meetings makes the process of leadership; the observation of patterns; and the ability to flex through a rich variety of tools and techniques which fully support a modern understanding of leadership possible.

However, grasping this opportunity will require some investment of effort. The current paradigm of meetings is so strong and ingrained that even those forward thinking managers who have run their own web-based meetings have largely imported their current practice into the new environment. A survey of people who set up and run web-based meetings show that the most commonly used functionality within the web-based environment are presentation, applications sharing and VoIP (audio). The remaining 80% of functionality available in web-based meeting software (the functionality which is key to participative tools) was either unknown or never used by 67% of those surveyed. Leaders have the understanding of modern leadership, and they have the skills, but we are failing to equip them and train them in the tools that are available to them to put it into practice.

Meetings are 'the process of leadership' and for the first time we have a real practical opportunity to transform how they work.