



Are Today's Leaders Better Than Yesterday's?

Ask someone for a list of the best leaders of all time, and I wonder how many will be our current leaders? Earlier this year Time magazine published their top 15, only two of which were operating as leaders today. The best political, cultural and sports leaders were all people of a past generation. This is a normal and expected conclusion, and will be of little surprise to you. Conversely, if you look at a book of records for human achievement you will tend to find that the fastest, strongest, most successful, most prolific exponents of virtually every other field of current human endeavour is of the current generation. Does this seem strange? If the law of averages is so great an influence, why are we better today at so many different things?

The reason for this is that, over the years, we have learnt from past techniques and technologies, we have refined them, we have been creative within them, we have developed them, and then we have been disciplined in practicing and using them. As a result, we gradually, inexorably get better at everything that is important to us - not just individually, but collectively. In short we recognise the process that is core to the achievement and we improve it in a methodical and disciplined manner, using measurement and review to guide our efforts. That is the expected pattern. It is actually Leadership that is the anomaly, and that raises a very important question:

Why hasn't leadership improved?

Why are our current leaders in so many fields actually on a par or sometimes inferior to the leaders who preceded them? Doesn't leadership too have a process which we can rigorously define and develop?

And the answer is that it does!

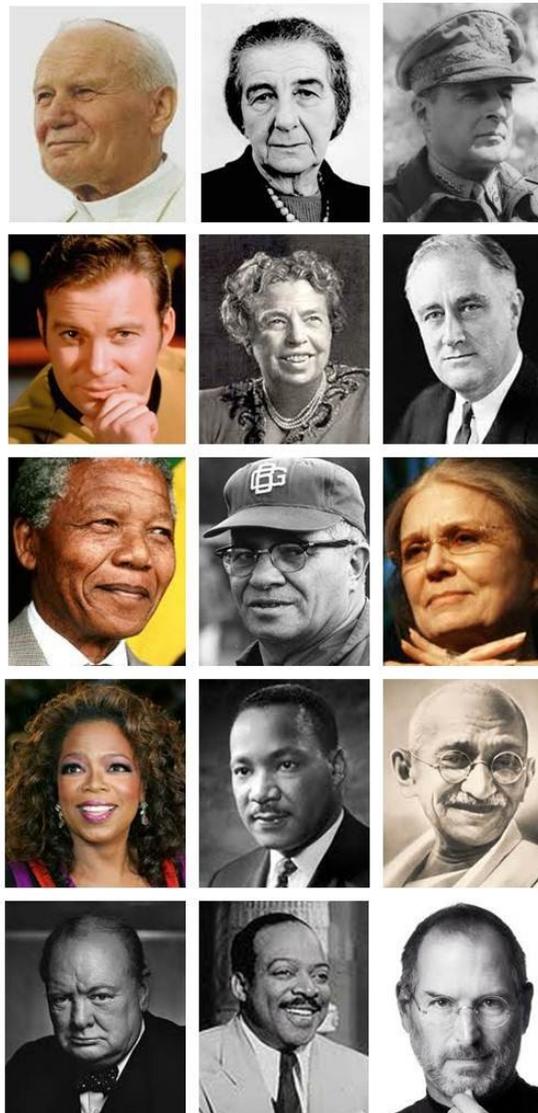
The key channel of leadership is through meetings, formal and informal. Leaders are only successful to the extent that they can inspire a group of people to identify the right goal and to work together to develop and pursue an effective strategy to deliver it. Leadership is exercised solely through its impact on other people and groups, predominantly through meetings of some sort or another.

And the strange thing about meetings is that, by and large, they do not improve. What we meet about has changed over time, and some of the technology we use to support meetings has developed radically over the past few decades, but 'how' we meet remains relatively constant.

To illustrate this a recent survey took the transcript of a meeting, changed all of the references to the topic and the technology employed, and then asked people to date the meeting purely on its form and process. Most people guessed the meeting to be very recent, but the range of answers varied over 500 years. Without being

able to rely on the topic, people were at a total loss as to how they might date the meeting, which was in fact bibli-

Time Life Magazine's 15 Greatest Leaders



cal in origin. In other words, on form and process alone, people could not tell the difference between a modern meeting and one 2000 years old.

And yet the effectiveness of our meeting process is a key factor, and even a determinant, of our success in practically everything else we do, particularly in the context of organisations and leadership. Whether it is a compelling talk, or active participation, the effectiveness of our 'leadership' depends on the journey we take people on and their opportunities to engage with it emotionally and creatively. In other words, it depends on the process.

And yet, for most of the meetings we consider, we appear largely oblivious that any such process exists. And even when we are aware of the process, we often seem reluctant (*or perhaps oblivious of the possibility*) to creatively develop it or to reflect on alternative best-practice options for achieving what we want to do. It is almost as if meetings 'just are', and on the rare occasions that we see process reflected within them, it tends to be at best mundane, and more commonly bureaucratic and even stultifying. It is rarely a process designed to inspire creativity, enthusiasm and commitment, and, as a result, meetings are seen as a Cinderella activity - a necessary drudgery to achieve what we need.

To illustrate this, try talking about "getting everyone to read a book on meetings" and see what enthusiasm this inspires. And yet we are happy to read titles like: 'The Victory secrets of Attila the Hun' or 'The Art of War by Sun Tzu'.

What is it about the state of our leadership processes that they are so poorly developed they can be improved by practices of a previous age? Is it not the lack of process that causes us to continually reinvent the practices we adopt?

Perhaps we are held back by the environment we meet in - perhaps it is in the tendency to collect around a tree stump, looked over by images of long-gone ancestors and our current talismans, that subconsciously draw us back to our indigenous routines.

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Well, if that is so, help could be arriving from an unexpected quarter. The advent of web-based meetings could be an opportunity far beyond the saving of travel costs and carbon.

At first glance, a less likely contender for a mechanism to improve the quality of leadership would be difficult to imagine. Most people's perception of web-based meetings would create the impression of something that limits and frustrates leadership rather than empowers it. They would reflect on the lack of eye contact, and the problems of engaging with people visually - and all of these issues are valid!

But the reason that these issues are valid has less to do with the limitations of web-based meetings, and are a lot more to do with limitations (*and a lack of options*) within our own leadership processes. In short, we currently have 'one way' of doing meetings, and that way does not work well in the web-based environment. Furthermore, and this is a bigger issue, it no longer works that well in the physical environment either - it is just that the problems are more obvious over the web.

We believe that it is these issues, and the context of the web-based environment, that will ultimately drive us to where we should have been some time ago - to the understanding of leadership and meetings as processes, and to the possibility, the very real possibility, of continuous improvement. If it does, there is every likelihood that our future leaders will indeed be dominant among the pictures on the first page.

So what do you think?

Feedback in one click: 

For background on the research quoted in this article, or to understand more about the opportunities of web-based meetings and further develop your thinking in this area we would recommend the book: **Meeting by Design** ISBN: 978 0954 302146. www.MeetingByDesign.org

Tools to measure and manage meeting effectiveness can be found at Inspirometer.com



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