

Listening Leadership*

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A popular image of a leader is of someone who is confident and forceful, a strong individual who directs, takes charge and issues commands. Leadership is often associated with action rather than reflection, doing rather than thinking, and talking rather than listening. Yet effective leaders need to be sensitive to others. They must be aware of what is happening around them. They have to receive as well as transmit.

Leaders are required to react to challenges and opportunities as well as drive forward. Where the collaboration and support of others is required, visions and aspirations have to be shared and mutually beneficial relationships are to be established and sustained, leaders need to take stock. The smarter ones find space to reflect. They listen to others and they empathise and absorb.

The ability to listen and pick up signals enables one to assess levels of understanding, agreement and commitment. It can help one to identify potential allies and opponents. Those who are in transmit mode can miss tell-tale signs of encouragement or warning. Those who talk rather than listen may forgo useful advice and miss vital information. Two-way communication is required.

Many people want the good things in life and the fruits of success can appear alluring. However, being successful, winning or even standing out comes more easily to some than to others. Striving for success can also bring costs as well as benefits. Rewards and recognition have to be earned, and they can be accompanied by accountability, obligations and responsibilities.

Leaders have opportunities to make a difference, but they also face challenges. What does it take to be a successful leader today? Reality television and game shows dangle the prospect of instant celebrity, but the experiences of many leaders who make an outstanding contribution to their organisations are often very different. Responsible leadership is listening leadership.

Who is leadership about?

Courses on leadership abound. In many organisations, even those which might appear to be totally devoid of leadership, most people have had multiple experiences of leadership training. Self-help books on how to get ahead are popular among those who harbour individual ambitions. Guidance is offered in areas such as how to make a favourable impact or how to build a personal brand.

An emphasis upon the self is expressed in many ways from expenditure on new clothes, to gym memberships and the use of personal trainers. People want to look and feel good. But what about others. There are other people in this world, whether networking targets at VIP receptions or roadside beggars. There are colleagues, employees and business partners who look to us for help and support, and customers who buy our offerings and thus pay our salaries.

There are various stakeholders who look to business leaders to look after their interests. To understand these interests, leaders must engage stakeholders and listen to them in order to appreciate their aspirations, issues, viewpoints and concerns. Success as an entrepreneur is often the consequence of helping other people to achieve their dreams. Failure is sometimes the result of exaggerating support and not being aware of other people's reservations.

In our personal lives there are our family and friends to consider. There are often many people without whom we might achieve very little. Claims that one is a leader cut little ice in the absence

of followers. Why should anyone follow someone or put themselves out for someone who ignores them, does not listen to them and is just pursuing their own personal aims?

Leadership is not about us. It is more about our relationships than our attributes. Leadership is about actions rather than positions. It is about service to others, service to customers, service to employees and service to business partners. Leadership can also be about service to a cause. People will go through a great deal and go the extra mile when they believe in a cause.

Over twenty years ago when I chaired the executive committee of the Order of St Lazarus in England and Wales our unpaid volunteers put themselves at risk by delivering medical supplies into areas riven with conflict and inter-communal strife. More recently in the Balkans I found bridges and buildings still scarred with bullet holes, and memorials to the dead along such mountain roads.

Visioning and a cause

A compelling vision can attract followers. Articulate and share a cause and others may come with you. They may join you because you are providing meaning to their lives, a meaning derived from an alignment of interests behind a shared purpose that is significant and worthwhile. People like to feel that they are doing something useful. This is especially true of generation Z. Many of my students at the University of Greenwich want to have an impact. They want to make a difference.

Many people today are distracted. They may be talented and full of latent potential, but they lack focus and direction. Personal qualities and corporate resources may or may not achieve a beneficial impact, depending upon what they are applied to and for what purpose. Listening to people and understanding what is important to them can enable the alignment of interests.

Choosing the right purpose or cause - one that is relevant, desirable and achievable - is important. Throughout history people on both sides of conflicts have felt that their cause is just. Choose carefully and responsibly. People can become the victims of causes as well as beneficiaries of them. Listening to them can help one to judge if their involvement is likely to be in their best interests.

Does our lives need to revolve around us? Could it revolve around a cause? Could your people achieve something above and beyond their current aspirations? Could you build a network, community, interest group or an institution to make it happen? Is there something that you enjoy doing and do well that could be turned into a business or a cause?

If you set out to do something truly significant and highly beneficial do not be afraid to ask for help. If you and people who share your commitment to a cause build something useful and helpful to others it may live on beyond your span on this earth and benefit generations to come. The work of the Order of Lazarus and its historic mission to address the scourge of leprosy attracts volunteers from one millennium to the next. Today fifteen million people are still afflicted with the disease.

Addressing the fundamentals

It is important to keep ones feet on the ground and ones ear to the ground. Dreams can inspire, but plans, actions, help and support may be needed to realise them. Integrity and persistence may be required to forge necessary links. Leaders have to distinguish between surface and substance. Some are so focused upon polishing their image and that of their companies that they forget to address the realities they face. If they are not listening they may not even be aware of some aspects of reality.

Superficial references to virtual teams and computing in the cloud can lead people to overlook the fundamentals of business operations and the effort that might be required to make them work.

Google may be described as an “internet business” but its searches are dependent upon large banks of powerful computers – physical electronic machines that need to be kept running.

Some leaders are preoccupied with the trappings of office. Seductive to some and bothersome to others, perks and appearances can become a distraction. Listening to colleagues can yield valuable clues as to their preoccupations and priorities. If a leadership team is devoting quality time to discussing the allocation of parking spaces to directors investors should worry. They and boards should keep the focus upon differentiators, critical success factors and customer value.

Leaders as role models

Leaders can become role models – whether positive or negative. One needs a sense of balance, responsibility and perspective, particularly when others may follow whatever example one sets. If leaders listen others may do so as well. Listening can yield useful feedback. Honest and objective assessments of progress and how one is perceived can be particularly valuable.

Leaders need to be especially careful about their personal conduct which needs to be appropriate. Just about any car in working condition may get someone from A to B. When leaders acquire the most expensive ones to inflate their egos others may feel resentful. In some contexts the brand and expectations may require symbols of status and excellence. In others modesty may be preferable.

In situations in which many people are concerned about their image, efforts to look better or more important and successful than others can be self-defeating. If everyone is pre-occupied with themselves and their own image, who is actually concerned about you and noticing the impression that you are trying to create? More importantly, who cares about what you are seeking to achieve?

Some people look over their shoulders and compare themselves with others rather than focus upon their cause and the importance of followers and allies. Other people may or may not listen to what you have to say, but they are likely to judge you by your conduct. Authenticity, integrity, modesty, commitment to a worthwhile cause, and deeds such as who one promotes and with whom and where one chooses to eat at a staff canteen can communicate a great deal.

Responsible communication

In order to share a vision and enlist support, leaders have to be effective two-way communicators. If they are to give their full commitment and if collective objectives are to be internalised and individual and corporate goals are to be aligned, followers may want to feel that they have been listened to and that their aspirations, requirements and views have been taken into account.

Some business leaders appear too slick. Their carefully crafted messages and silky delivery are so smooth that they do not stick. Sometimes there is an inverse relationship between the polishing of a message and its impact. The person who is nervous and less suave but who is sincere, clearly concerned about an audience, trying to be relevant, and endeavouring to help may achieve more.

Responsible leaders do not necessarily exploit any gifts they might have for oratory and persuasion. Naivety and the desire of some people to belong and fit in can be exploited. The ability to attract followers and get people to do things can be a dangerous quality when applied to the wrong ends. Being fair and putting the interests of others first can attract strong support for a noble cause.

Integrity, fairness and flexibility

Being seen to take advantage and to exploit others can undermine trust and turn people off. When

they are properly regulated, there is open and free competition, and people have a choice, markets can be intrinsically fair. It is difficult to discriminate when people can turn to an alternative source of supply. Confident people welcome competition that can spur improvement and innovation.

While protectionism, corruption and favouritism may benefit a few, its costs can be borne by many. Business leaders should create new options and champion fair play. When taking decisions they should endeavour to do what is right and also aim to be fair. If customers, investors, colleagues and communities feel they have been unfairly treated, relationships with them are unlikely to last.

Even the best of leaders may not get everything right. Errors of judgement happen. People sometimes make the wrong call. The most dangerous individuals are those who do not listen to others and who are convinced they are right, even when events prove they were wrong. Intolerant of criticism they press on, throwing good money after bad. Hence the value of boards that challenge.

Some leaders divide opinions and allegiances where others would unify them. Differences between interests can be exploited or they can be balanced and/or reconciled. On occasion a degree of compromise that does not endanger the achievement of key goals can remove obstacles to progress. Flexibility is different from being rudderless. There may be more than one route to a destination.

Persistence, resilience and openness

A desire not to be seen as a 'quitter' and/or an inability to acknowledge when one is wrong can have disastrous consequences. Changing direction can be a sign of strength rather than an indication of weakness. Insecure people rationalise mistakes. More confident ones learn from them. Rather than search for scapegoats, their focus is upon damage limitation and finding better alternatives.

Integrity, humility and an ability to listen to others and attract those who will give honest and objective advice are valuable qualities. Listening shows respect. Regard should be given to minority opinions, particularly when those concerned have the best interests of an organisation and/or cause at heart. They should be given a voice as events may prove them right. The chair of a board should ensure contending viewpoints are considered and not steamroller through the agenda.

Leaders need to be resilient. Like bouncing balls they should rise up again when they fall. In order to succeed they must learn how to cope with setbacks and disappointment. The probability of failure can be reduced by carrying out risk analyses and taking relevant advice. Sometimes decisions have to be taken under the pressure of events. The potential costs of not taking action can outweigh the gains from further analysis. These are the situations when decisiveness and courage are required.

Decisiveness and focus

Leadership is about focus and relevance rather than being clever. It is about what people do with their capabilities. It is not about being smart and finding and exploiting loopholes for personal advantage. It could be about developing solutions, providing choices and meeting needs. Very intelligent people sometimes see so many angles to problems that they procrastinate.

Can one seek too many opinions? Windows of opportunity can be missed as a result of excessive analysis. One can listen without necessarily agreeing. Choices may need to be made. Leaders have to be prepared to take difficult decisions. The buck often stops with them. They may have to quickly weigh alternatives, sound opinions and come to a conclusion. Sensing when the time is right to take a decision is a key requirement of effective leadership .

One also needs a sense of perspective to be an effective leader. Some people make mountains out of

molehills. What is important to one stakeholder group may be of little significance to another. Leadership is often a question of weighing contending interests, and achieving a balance between action and reaction, activity and reflection and change and continuity. It is also about sensitive antennae and being alert to biased opinions, exaggeration, distortions, lies and vested interests.

New leadership and developing and supporting others

When surrounded by committed colleagues, effective leadership can require a shift of emphasis away from top-down command and control and towards the provision of better support, particularly of those in demanding front-line roles. The 'new leadership' I advocate in recent reports such as *Transforming Knowledge Management*, *Talent Management 2* and *Transforming Public Services* is more about helping people and delivering multiple benefits for people, organisations and the planet (Coulson-Thomas, 2012a and b, 2013).

To provide effective learning and performance support one needs to listen to people, particularly key front-line work groups that engage with customers and deliver key corporate objectives, in order to understand the practical problems and challenges they face. What would they like more or less of? What is getting in the way of higher performance? What additional assistance would most help them to make progress?

Finding success can sometimes be like searching for the end of a rainbow. When you directly pursue your own personal aims and agendas it can prove elusive. Help other people to achieve their dreams and you may also benefit. Listening to others helps one to discover what is important to them? Smart entrepreneurs spend time with those who use or consume their products and services.

Effective leaders share opportunities as well as burdens. Where the assistance of others is required, they may well conclude that a smaller percentage of something is better than a larger proportion of nothing. Sharing success with those who help to bring it about can forge strong relationships.

Confident and secure leaders put much effort into developing others. They work with the grain. They find out what people are good at and then they give them roles and provide them with development opportunities that build upon their strengths. They put together teams composed of people with complementary qualities and they also recognise the benefits of diversity.

Complacency and re-invention

However successful they might appear to be, leaders who rest upon their laurels are taking a great risk. Complacency is the enemy of continued competitiveness. Marconi imploded as a result of a mistaken strategy pursued by its leadership team. Nokia had been a market leader, but the company was knocked off its perch as a result of failure to innovate and anticipate new developments.

Reinvention can be the key to longevity at the cutting edge. Business leaders can maximise the future chances of their companies by listening, challenging and staying close to their customers. Not every business will be the first to innovate, just as not every scientific investigator will achieve a breakthrough. However, there is no excuse for not being alert and for stopping to ask questions.

Sustained leadership and periodic reinvention may follow, but people must first question whether current priorities, past practices, prevailing attitudes, cherished beliefs, familiar approaches, shared assumptions and widely held preconceptions are still valid. Circumstances may have moved on and new windows of opportunity may be opening up. One needs to be alert to trends and developments.

The values that a leader instils in an organisation may live on, but they might also need to be

reassessed. As priorities and concerns change, a shift of emphasis and new values may be required. Keeping a flame alive and passing it to the next generation can be a vital contribution. Being an effective custodian of a vision can require re-engagement with stakeholders, a re-assessment of aims and the re-establishment of relevance.

Capitalism and business leadership

There are critics who question the desirability of competitive capitalism, or who suggest that business leadership is in some way less commendable than thought, academic, cultural, artistic, sporting, moral or religious leadership. Competition is a mechanism. Competition that leads to innovation, scientific or technological breakthroughs and new offerings, options and choices for meeting needs or confronting challenges can be highly beneficial.

Be proud to be a business leader. Many business leaders have command of significant and in some cases scarce and precious intellectual, financial and material resources. They have the potential to make a contribution as significant as those of leaders in other arenas.

As a concept leadership is neutral. It is neither desirable nor undesirable. Its purposes and how people use leadership roles determines whether it is beneficial or harmful. Some leaders add value while others do not. The actions of certain leaders limit what people they are responsible for achieve. Others go off the rails, perhaps as a result of listening to the wrong people and for the wrong reasons. Self-aware leaders reflect on their legacies and what their obituaries might say.

Sustaining success

Leadership can be so much more than broad generalisation, making motivational speeches and issuing sweeping statements. The right combination of words may inspire, but the lift created may be short lived on first contact with the realities of the marketplace. There may be practical details to attend to. Boards need to ensure that resources and capabilities match aspirations. Listening can sharpen one's assessment of what is possible in a particular situation.

While assembling capabilities may create a potential for success, its realisation can depend upon how well relevant resources are serviced, supported and effectively used. Successful generals pay attention to the front-line but they also ensure that appropriate logistics arrangements are in place.

Sustainability is more than a question of perpetuating a certain level of profitability. Where the environment is fragile, and with the challenge of global warming, one may need to find new ways of operating that will reduce emissions and minimise demands upon scarce resources. People's time is precious to them so also needs to be used wisely.

Leadership succession

Knowing when to go - when to stand down and hand over to a successor - distinguishes the leader who is self-aware and who puts an organisation or business first. Some people do their reputations great harm by staying in office beyond their 'use by' date. They become stale, set in their ways or out of touch. The chair of a board should alert an incumbent CEO to concerns of directors and shareholders. On occasion leaders are fired. Others remain open, willing to learn and alert to what is happening around them and in the marketplace. They remain relevant and continue to add value.

Leaders can lose the plot, surround themselves with flatterers or run out of steam. Some people weave a complex web of arrangements and call in favours in an attempt to hang on. Those who put the interests of an organisation first and who listen to wise and honest counsel when approaching

decisions are more likely to know when the moment is right to call time.

Responsible leaders ensure that processes are in place to appoint a competent successor. They put a high priority upon ensuring an organisation has the people who can take it to the next level. In some cases, the team that follows them may become their greatest legacy and the best guarantee that a company and/or cause and what they have stood for will survive and thrive.

Recognition

An interesting question is whether leadership has to be recognised by others for it to be fulfilling and what form recognition should take. Some people engage in activities that are easier to recognise than others. Holding a senior position and being visible can increase the chances of formal recognition, but there may be other contributors who are under the radar and out of sight. Leaders should identify hidden heroes and thank them for their efforts and help.

No amount of external recognition can compensate for a lack of self-worth. For people who are committed to a cause, the support of others can be more important than personal recognition. They know what they have achieved. They know what they have made happen. No-one can take this away from them. People they have helped and those they have inspired know their contributions.

Ultimately fulfilment comes from within, the peace of mind that can result from having few regrets, and the satisfaction that can come from listening and learning and the knowledge that leadership positions have been used to make the world a better place.

Note

This article is based upon a special address by Prof. Colin Coulson-Thomas that was delivered on Friday, 23rd May 2014 at the 24th World Congress on Total Quality and Leadership, an annual event that was held this year at the Hotel Taj Vivanta, Trivandrum, Kerala, India. The world congress is organised by the Institute of Directors, an Indian organisation concerned with building better boards which this year celebrates its twenty-fifth anniversary.

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