

authentic leadership

In recent months we have all been shocked to witness the shortcomings of many so-called leaders in the financial sector. In the UK people have been further angered by the impression that many of our political leaders lack ethical or moral fibre. There is a suggestion that, in all this, we are seeing signs of the disintegration of social structures, or at least structures of organisation, that no longer serve us well. In addition, many working in the domain of leadership and organisational development believe that organisations are on the cusp of change. Such change will likely be away from hierarchical and mechanistic structures towards something more organic, responsive and self-regulating.

20th century ideas of leadership have suited 20th century organisations but do not meet modern needs. It is not so much that 'great leaders' cannot be found or cannot be trusted but simply that the old structures are not fit for purpose in the 21st century. Hopefully after these dog days of disintegrating order, we can all look forward to playing our part in the emergence of inspirational, ethical leadership, in which everyone learns to preach what they practice.

In 20 years of developing leadership and teams, I have been struck by the fact that leadership, first of all, is not a personal attribute but is inter-personal. Secondly, that most leadership development seems to focus on developing skills of manipulation that often have a negative effect on those who find themselves in the role of follower. Indeed, I find the very idea of 'follower' is limiting and negative. A follower would appear to have no responsibility for leadership but, if leadership is what flows between people, everyone surely has a part in sustaining it. Distributed leadership manifests through everyone.

Future leadership must be distinguished by its authenticity. Authentic leadership is not an outward show or technique but a way of being that comes from deep within the person. The foundation of authentic leadership, then, is the deployment of the self. There is no room for pretence. Authentic leadership depends upon real self-knowledge, humility, honesty, without which only counterfeit leadership will result.

To lead means two things - it means to go first and it also means to bring others along. One can do one without the other but when the two combine, authentic leadership comes to bear. To venture into the unknown requires courage. To bring others along means to evoke authenticity in everyone throughout an organisation. It is then a tautology that authentic leadership is ethical leadership and that authentic leaders are those with integrity.

Sustaining authentic leadership requires us to be capable of self-management and then to be equipped with social skills, particularly the ability to enter into communication and relationship. With an understanding of how self-organisation occurs we develop our leadership role by manifesting our own skills, capacity and intent - actually exhibiting leadership in our behaviour!

It is clear, then, that authentic, distributed leadership is both the end and the means of developing new organisational cultures able to engage people in working passionately to towards common purpose. It begins with you - now!

John Varney,
May 2009