

RELUCTANT LEADERSHIP - entering the unknown

john varney

"Leaders are born not made" it is said. If that is so, why is it that leadership development is so very much in demand these days? Well, in times of rapid unpredictable change (and what organisation is not grappling with that one?) the particular indefinable magic that gives confidence in the future is that same much sought after phenomenon called leadership.

Our survival - as individuals as well as organisations - depends upon our capacity to develop as fast as the rate of change in our environment. In other words it depends on our capacity to learn. In this context leaders are those who can show the way and the role of leadership is to lead the learning - shaping the future by redefining meaning in a changing world.

We are all born with the capacity to learn but, having gained expertise in our domain, may have neglected to develop it further. When faced with uncertainty we urgently need to rediscover our birthright.

Most of us have an innate awareness that working in collaboration with others can be a dynamic, fulfilling and, moreover, highly effective experience. This tends to put us in conflict with what are commonly self-centred, short-sighted and fragmentary values in the prevailing business climate. Given the reductionist world view within which we have been brought up and educated, few of us take a broad enough perspective to resolve this conflict and so find ourselves condemned to live fragmented lives fraught with stress.

There is a very real difficulty in seeking a breakthrough. All our judgements are made on the basis of our experience of the past. That makes us liable to eliminate the signals from the future and even to shoot their messengers. Executives and human resource specialists, embedded as they must be in the current perceptions of how organisations work, may well be blind to the vital clues they seek. It seems altogether safer to follow current fashions and to tinker with incremental improvements than to listen to vague intuitions or to entertain bold visions of organisational transformation.

It is a trap we can all fall into. It is easy enough to read the books and attend the seminars, adding to our knowledge. But there is a danger that such knowledge becomes an obstacle to deeper learning. It is a natural characteristic of self-organising systems that they seek reinforcement of the established patterns. Then our very expertise blocks our receptivity to signals of change.

What makes the leadership of learning difficult is that leadership is not something you do "out there", it is more accurately something about what you are becoming and what you stand for. Not so much doing something different as being something different. That means you cannot treat leadership as something you do from time to time - it affects every aspect of your being. The very idea is a threat to our compartmentalised view of the world.

Alas, among the many senior managers I meet, few are able to put themselves into the melting pot - and without that personal commitment leadership eludes them. The way our minds work means that we are inclined to import "explanations" of, say, leadership into our existing world view - but we find it impossible to act upon that information because to do so would actually change our world view. Our world view is the known - new behaviour takes us into the unknown. We are accustomed to knowing "all about" something while not knowing it directly in our experience. Thus, although leadership is called for and we may wish to lead we appear to be reluctant to do so.

To display leadership requires personal courage and the humility to let go the old and the familiar in order to enter the unknown. Saying this is easy - doing it is more difficult. We have to forsake our expertise and our importance in order to acknowledge our ignorance. We really do have to enter the unknown. Our only hope is confidence in our capacity to cope whatever we discover. The attitude that empowers people to do this is perhaps the most vital and valuable "secret of life".

People who have years of management expertise and who have attended the best business colleges may yet be unable to face the unknown. I have seen mere upstarts outstrip practised experts just because the practised experts could not handle the uncertainty. I have seen too many senior managers whose accomplished skills obscured from them the opportunity to nurture leadership in themselves and others.

What appears to be reluctance to lead may well be a failure to recognise the way. What is needed is the courage to challenge the ordinary motivations of our current existence - to break the patterns of behaviour, assumptions, attitudes, values and beliefs that lock us into ever repeating cycles. As we begin to recognise and welcome the flavour of unfolding the unknown we develop a leadership attitude. When we acquire the intent of a leader our capacity and knowledge expand. Some may be able to do this alone. Most of us need to companions on the way to discovery.

At the Centre for Management Creativity we specialise in breaking down obstacles and inspiring effective leadership. When people are touched by a developmental experience they recognise it as a turning point in their lives.

Experiential learning is powerful, not for the useful but simplistic lessons about problem solving or interpersonal skills often focused upon, but for the possibility it offers of discovering and transcending the limits of the world as we know it.

Apart from courage it takes some extra shock to jolt us into accepting responsibility for our world. The artificial and safe world of experiential learning can enable us to transcend the known and learn first-hand about our capacity for the unknown.