Leadership –
It’s time to debunk the Myths!

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‘Leadership’, like most popular subjects, is viewed with fascination by some, and tiresome, or regarded as ‘faddish’ by others. Certainly there is no shortage of literature on the subject, but just how useful, or even dangerous, is it?

For the last two decades, the leadership landscape has been dominated by US models of visionary and charismatic leaders. But just how relevant are they for organisations at the beginning of the 21st century?

We are not alone in questioning these models – increasingly, Leadership writers are asking whether these ‘new paradigm’ models are anything more than a new ‘spin’ on the old notion of the ‘heroic’ leader which characterised the ‘Great Man’ theories of the 1930-1950s. They are also asking how relevant and practical are such models for every day life, for individuals who don't happen to occupy the top echelons of organisations. Furthermore, although rarely stated, it is also worth noting, that leadership research, has been based almost exclusively on the study of white males. Notions of leadership are affected by what is happening in the world surrounding organisations. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the tragedies of 9/11, and the consequences of the spectacular corporate corruption scandals of organisations such as Enron, Amcom, and WorldCom, have challenged our understanding of what is leadership. There is now, increased concern regarding the potential dangers of ‘charisma’ in the hands of some individuals, and the contributions of writers such as Jim Collins, and Henry Mintzberg are fuelling the debate as to where to go in the ‘post-heroic’ era?

It is against this back-cloth that we work as researchers and developers in the area. Fortunately for us, organisations are hammering at our doors to hear the latest wisdom on the subject. However, we too were becoming increasingly disenchanted with the ‘spin’ that pervades the literature, and were most concerned with the direction that it was taking. Thus, armed with a commission from the Local Government Management Board (now The Improvement & Development Agency) to conduct an investigation of leadership at all organisational levels, and including both women and men, and ethnic minority staff, we set about conducting possibly the largest study ever of what is exactly the nature of leadership.
‘Distant’ versus ‘Nearby’ leadership

A little more on the background to leadership. The ‘new paradigm’ models which emerged in the mid-1980s (as opposed to the ‘old paradigm’ situational models, which are now commonly regarded as models of ‘transactional leadership’, or simply, ‘management’), have concerned themselves with ‘distant’ leadership, or the characteristics of managers at the top of organisations, such as CEOs. We, however, were concerned with the day-to-day behaviours of managers/bosses with whom one comes into frequent contact. Such leadership has been referred to as ‘nearby’ leadership. Research has shown that the characteristics we associate with ‘great leaders’ or famous CEOs, typically include factors such as ‘charisma’, inspiration’, etc., otherwise, how else do they grab our attention? However, if one was to ask individuals in organisations to think of bosses they had worked with who had a particularly powerful and positive impact on their motivation, job satisfaction, commitment, and effectiveness (compared with ‘lousy’ bosses), people tend to say things like…”they were interested in me; valued me; trusted and empowered me; supported my development, etc.. It was clear to us that the people from whom we should seek views of nearby leadership, were the people on whom they were intending to have a positive impact; in other words, staff. This makes even more sense in the light of recent findings from evidence of the importance of ‘engagement’.

The Link Between Organisational Success, Leadership & ‘Engagement’

Given the need for organisations to be highly competitive in delivering the highest levels of performance whilst controlling their staff costs, they are increasingly grappling with the challenge of how they can significantly increase the ‘discretionary effort’ of their employees - that is the desire to give of one’s very best and at times go beyond the basic requirements of the role - by increasing and sustaining motivation, job satisfaction, and job and organisational commitment (because these have consistently been found to affect performance), whilst not having a dysfunctional impact on work-related stress. The answer appears to lie around the subject of ‘engagement’.

The subject of ‘engagement’ is becoming increasingly popular in the field of organisational behaviour and the related management press, because of its clear business case. Several recent studies undertaken by major consultancy companies have found that the most successful companies, and the ones that outperform their peers, are those where employee surveys reveal high levels of morale and commitment, which are other ways of describing engagement. For example, a recent US survey over the last 5 years of 24 publicly traded companies with a total of over 250,000 employees, found that the stock prices of the 11 ‘high morale’ companies increased an average of 19.4%, while those of other companies in the same industries increased by an average of only 8% - a margin of 240% (Sirota Survey Intelligence, 2006), and a Watson Wyatt study (2005) asserts that a company with highly engaged employees typically achieves a financial performance four times better than a company with poor employee attitudes.
Link this to the findings that one of the most important variables contributing to ‘engagement’ is the influence of the employee’s line manager, and the need to understand the nature of ‘nearby’ day-to-day leadership comes into clear relief. This is also corroborated by a study by Towers Perrin (2005) of more than 85,000 people working for large and midsize companies in 16 countries on four continents, which concludes that “while many people are keen to contribute more at work, the behaviour of their managers and the culture of their organisations is actively discouraging them from doing so”.

Our Investigation into ‘Engaging’ Leadership

Our intention was to investigate leadership – initially in the UK public sector, but later replicated in the private sector - through the eyes of those whom they are intending to ‘lead’. That is, we studied ‘nearby’ leadership, at middle to chief executive level, in various organisations in the public sector, and in 3 FTSE 100 companies based in the UK. The findings from the public and private sectors were virtually the same.¹

In brief, using a technique called repertory grid interviewing, we asked individuals to compare outstanding, average, ‘poor’ bosses, and their notion of ‘an ideal boss’, and elicited over 2000 constructs of leadership from managers and professionals, at middle to chief executive levels. We then content analysed the statements, and from these data developed a pilot leadership questionnaire which was distributed to over 600 organisations. Individuals in these organisations were asked to anonymously rate their current, or previous, boss on the questionnaire statements. Analyses of over 3,500 responses revealed a far more complex model of leadership than hitherto described in the literature, and one of a very different tenor from that which typifies dominant US models. We have also recently completed a similar study in UK private sector organisations, and found virtually the same dimensions², ³.

The model is represented by 14 dimensions of ‘engaging’ transformational leadership, which we have clustered under 3 headings: ‘Leading and Developing Individuals’, ‘Personal Qualities’, and ‘Leading the Organisation’. Figure 1 describes the scales.

It is important to note how our model differs from the dominant US ones that currently represent the ‘received wisdom’.


Firstly, the emphasis is not on heroism, but on serving and enabling others to lead themselves. It is not about being an extraordinary person, but rather a somewhat ordinary vulnerable and humble, or at least very open, accessible, and transparent individual. Secondly, it contains a persistent theme of team-working and ‘connectedness’, and of removing barriers to communication and ideas, whether between individuals at different levels, or in different teams and departments, or with outside ‘stakeholders’ and partners. It consistently echoes the ability to see the world through the eyes of others, and to take on board their concerns, agenda, perspectives on issues, and to work with their ideas.

Another persistent theme is to encourage questioning and challenging of the status quo, and to ensure this happens by creating an environment in which these ideas are truly valued, and in which inevitable mistakes are exploited for their learning opportunities. Leadership acts as a ‘cognitive catalyst’, shocking and even iconoclastic.

Gone is the military model, along with the notion of one person having the monopoly on the vision. This model (which by the way is currently being embraced by military, and quasi-military organisations), replaces it with a far more exciting, complex and challenging one, in which the emphasis is on leadership behaviours and attitudes rather than being seen as possessing the God-given right that comes automatically with senior status.

Our research has identified the precise nature of the leadership behaviours that create a sense of engagement in an organisation’s culture. Moreover, we have now established that there is a direct & significant association between the behaviours of leadership of a boss assessed by the 360-feedback instrument we developed on the basis of our findings, and the impact that they have on increased motivation, job satisfaction, job and organisational commitment, and reduced stress of their staff. And the good news is that these behaviours are capable of being developed. We have evidence of seeing the effects of change on individuals’ leadership approaches as a result of using the 360-feedback instrument we developed from the findings, The Engaging Transformational Leadership Questionnaire (ELQ)™ (formerly the TLQ), and evaluations of its use, and outcomes from various culture change projects in which we have been involved.4

A Cultural Diagnostic Instrument

One consistent lesson from research on the effectiveness of leadership development initiatives, is that without embedding the practice in the culture of the organisation, there is a danger of creating raised expectations which will then be dashed by a punitive culture.

4 Details available from the authors
With this in mind, and our associated consultancy work, we have now developed an instrument for assessing an organisation’s culture, in relation to: (1) how competent and capable it is; and at the same time, (2) how engaging and transformational, the **Leadership Culture & Change Inventory (LCCI)™**. If the LCCI™ is distributed widely across the organisation, and to other stakeholders with whom it works, or to whom it relates, for example customer/client groups, it can pinpoint the exact areas of the organisation which require some form of developmental/change intervention. It allows further analyses by groups, such as by gender, age, ethnic background, level, etc., for deeper analyses. By using the instrument before an intervention, and then some time after the initiative, the success of the activities can be measured. Analyses can also show whether it was more or less successful for different groups of employees and other stakeholders, or particular parts of the organisation. One clear message from its use, is that views of the organisation’s culture can be very different from the perspective of these groups, which in turn suggests that culture change initiatives must be customised to meet the specific ‘realities’ of these groups.

**Transformational & Transactional Leadership**

It is important to stress, that both transactional (i.e. ‘management’), and transformational leadership, are required in organisations in order to be effective. In fact the real skill is in **doing the transactional components** of one’s job (ie setting objectives, planning, providing feedback, professional competencies etc.) **in an engagingly transformational way**.

**Final Comments**

We believe that our research is at the cutting-edge of leadership for the beginning of the 21st century. The world is becoming smaller, in that communication is rapid and relationships are becoming increasingly inter-connected, within and across organisations, between organisations, and between countries, often thousands of miles apart. Given the complexity of the challenges faced by organisations and society in the modern world, leadership must be ubiquitous, emphasise respect and value diversity, but most importantly, support the ways we work together for mutual benefit.
Figure 1
Dimensions of Leadership assessed by
The Engaging Leadership Questionnaire (ELQ)™

Leading & Developing Others (1)

Showing Genuine Concern
Genuine interest in staff as individuals; values their contributions; develops them

Enabling
Trusts staff to take decisions/initiatives on important matters; delegates effectively; develops staffs’ potential.

Being Accessible, approachable,
Approachable and not status-conscious; accessible and keeps in-touch.

Encourages questioning
Encourages questioning traditional approaches to the job; encourages new approaches/solutions to problems; encourages strategic thinking.

Personal Qualities (2)

Being Honesty, & Consistent
Honest and consistent in behaviour; more concerned with the good of the organisation than personal ambition.

Acting with Integrity
Open to criticism and disagreement; regards values as integral to the organisation.

Being Decisive; risk-taking
Decisive when required; prepared to take difficult decisions, and risks when appropriate.

Inspirational; in-touch
 Inspires others to join them.

Analytical & creative thinker
Capacity to deal with a wide range of complex issues; creative in problem-solving
Leading the Organisation (3)

Networker & achiever

Inspiring communicator of the vision to a wide network of stakeholders; gains the confidence and support of various groups by achieving organisational goals.

Clarifies individual and team direction, priorities, & purpose

Clarifies objectives and boundaries; team-orientated to decision-making and to identifying values.

Unites through a joint vision

Has a clear vision, in which s/he engages various internal and external stakeholders; draws others together in achieving the vision.

Creates a supportive learning environment

Supportive when mistakes are made; encourages critical feedback of the service provided.

Manages change sensitively & skilfully

Sensitive to the impact of change on individuals and different parts of the organisation; maintains a balance between change and stability.