Leadership – A New Direction

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Leadership

Leadership is an elusive quality. Whether good or bad, it is easy to recognise, but hard to define. In a commando engineer field squadron all the troop commanders were equally well trained and performing well. In inter troop military and sporting competitions one troop always came first and another always came last. In order to test the myth that one troop was not as good as the other the squadron commander switched troop leaders leaving everything else the same. Within three weeks the situation was reversed. Clearly the leaders made the difference, but what did one do that the other did not?

In the Health Service a new hospital general manager came into post. She had many ideas of how to change and improve the service and tried to implement them. Of all the obvious changes, in organisation and service delivery, the one which had the most impact, in that everyone knew about it and it was most publicly discussed, was when she changed the staff car parking rules. There were no longer reserved spaces but anyone could park in any free space. Why was this such a significant event?

In an Australian mine a well liked plant operator had been sacked because he had refused to work overtime on an urgent job when his manager had asked him to. The manager believed he was entitled, within the constraints of the Union agreement, to take the action he did. The operator was sacked at 4 pm; his fellow unionists promptly called an indefinite strike and began an orderly shut down of the plant with the aim of having everything stopped and cold by 8 am. the following morning.

The management group met late in the afternoon and had decided by 9 pm. that it was possible to put a different interpretation on the Union agreement from the one they had used in the dismissal. The General Manager decided to approach the Union and tell them he had made a mistake and would reinstate the sacked employee. The normal approach in such circumstances was to have the dispute heard in the Labour Court. The Union leaders were approached at 10 pm. and responded as follows: "We don't know if we can round up the night shift boys by midnight to get the plant rolling again, but are on our way to try." They were successful. This was a totally unexpected reaction given the combative and antagonistic nature of Australian industrial relations and the history of the plant: Why?

This article attempts to offer a new approach to the study of leadership that will not only answer the questions above but also enable a clearer distinction to be made between effective and ineffective leaders.

In the past leadership theory has been dominated by models which stress characteristics or traits: charismatic, extrovert, aggressive, or personal competencies; vision, courage, determination, drive or maturity. Other models stress the "situational" approach. It is the characteristics of the situation, such as whether it is structured or unstructured, whether the leader is in a powerful or weak position, whether the climate for agreement is friendly or hostile which determine whether or not a leader is effective or ineffective or how he or she should behave. The problem with all these approaches is that they produce too many exceptions that go far beyond "proving the rule".

Then there is the added complication of leadership versus management. Are they the same? How do they differ? A generally held belief is that leadership is a personal quality and management some sort of lesser, more technical ability often to do with control of resources.

This article is concerned with leadership in organisations. As such leaders will occupy roles. These roles may have different titles: manager, supervisor, foreman, project leader, captain, general, ward sister, etc. One of the problems in organisations is the lack of clarity with regard to accountability and authority with respect to such roles. Some may have direct control over who they manage, some do not. It is a common characteristic that in most organisations "leaders" have some authority in determining membership of their work group.1

Whatever the title the fundamental purpose of any leader, including a manager, is to create, maintain and improve a group of people so that they achieve objectives and continue to do so over time. There are two essential elements in understanding effective leadership; one has to do with basic values, the other with the capability of the leader.

Basic Values

Understanding how basic values operate is fundamental to leadership theory. There is much discussion about changing values, for example how young people reject the values of their parents. There are assumptions about Victorian values and permissive values. There tends to be considerable confusion about the range of terms, namely values, beliefs, attitudes, philosophies. These terms tend to be used interchangeably, people are said to have the "wrong attitude", "mistaken beliefs", "outdated values", "confused philosophies".
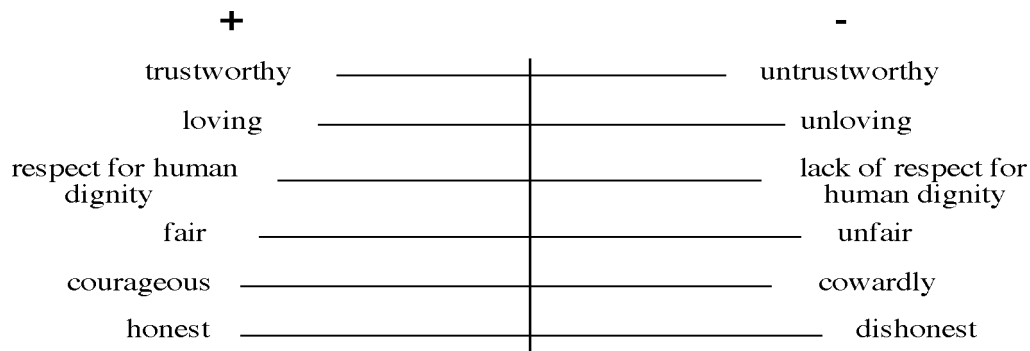
Despite views about changing values there is a common set of basic values which all human beings share and which is the foundation of social cohesion. Even social insects have specific complex chemicals which allow individual insects to function as productive members of a very coherent social group. These chemicals are their operating mechanism. Human beings are dependent for survival on the coherence and maintenance of social groups. Therefore the values which are fundamental to the existence of human social groups are essential to human survival. Behaviour which is perceived to demonstrate these values is seen as worthwhile and is encouraged. Behaviour which is perceived not to demonstrate these values is seen as unworthy and unacceptable. If people behave in a way which is consistent with positive value they are accepted and appreciated; people who behave in a way which is inconsistent are rejected and/or punished, corrected or, in religion, excommunicated.

This basic set of values is considered to be:

TRUST   LOVE   DIGNITY

FAIRNESS   COURAGE

HONESTY

Thus for groups or societies to exist over time, members must be seen to be trustworthy, fair, courageous, honest and treat people with love and dignity. It is hard to see a group continue, if one or more of these values is absent.

In terms of group relationships, behaviour can be rated on continua:

+		-
trustworthy		untrustworthy
loving		unloving
respect for human dignity		lack of respect for human dignity
fair		unfair
courageous		cowardly
honest		dishonest

Values cannot always be observed and determined directly. We can and do observe what people say and how they behave. All of us interpret behaviour and draw conclusions about the values an individual's behaviour demonstrates. There may be disagreement between people as to the validity of this interpretation. Socially it is necessary to be able accurately to draw conclusions from such assumptions in order to be able to relate to someone and be able to predict their likely responses.

It is not possible consciously to rate every action. Consequently there is a requirement for some sort of short-hand, a set of assumptions. These assumptions allow behaviour to be categorised very quickly. Thus there is a whole set of these assumptions, some of which are explicit: "don't trust someone with a blue suit and brown shoes", "anyone who hits their child cannot love them", "it is never dignifying to reprimand someone in public", 'it is only fair that people should be treated equally by law", "anyone who stands up to Margaret Thatcher must be courageous", "people who cheat their taxes are as dishonest as thieves".

Unfortunately life is not as simple as that. When faced with conscious choice it is not that easy. Is it always wrong to lie, or be economical with the truth, under all circumstances. Is it ever permissible to use physical violence to achieve objectives? Should everyone get an equal chance, what if some are more or less able, should they have special treatment? Or, more mundanely, should everyone eat in the same canteen? What is fair pay for a particular job? Should you dismiss a subordinate who will not get another job? Hard and fast rules, although tempting and part of a seductive black and white world do not always work in practice, given specific circumstances.

Mythologies

Assumptions about behaviour are developed through life. Individuals try to influence and persuade others sometimes by taking a moral stance. Most of the time these assumptions or beliefs are not explicitly questioned, which is why it is disturbing when they are. These assumptions are used to understand other people, particularly when there is a requirement to predict behaviour, which is critical in social relationships. Most of them are embedded, not conscious, as part of our socialisation and experience.

It is surprising how quickly individuals categorise, make judgements or assign worth on minimal behavioural evidence. Think of the extremes, judging people on their race, colour of skin, class, religion, occupation and how difficult it is to swim upstream against such prejudices, for example that young unemployed Afro-Caribbeans are dishonest and untrustworthy.

These assumptions are called MYTHOLOGIES. This is because most are based not on well-researched fact but direct or indirect selected experiences, many taught in childhood. MYTHOLOGIES are the assumptions or, more strongly, beliefs which allow us to attribute motive to behaviour. They allow us to assign values and to position people on a positive/negative scale in response to a particular observation of behaviour. They affect what is often called motivation. They determine the strength of an individual's behaviour. For a leader it does not matter if these assumptions are "true" or not. What matters is the way people perceive the world. If a leader does not understand how people interpret his or her or other people's behaviour he or she will fail as a leader.

In extreme cases a behaviour will be welded to one end or other of the values continuum. Such a direct and immutable association is typical of fundamentalist thinking and eventually develops into or from ideology or dogma. For example, the ten commandments of the Old Testament, laid down by God through the Israelites' leader Moses. He delivered the literal tablets of stone. Look at the furore over the Salman Rushdie book "Satanic Verses" and Islamic insistence on certain punishment following specific behaviours - adultery, theft and so on. In political life for example; "the right to inherited wealth" or "the free market" will determine the direction of a group. Such mythologies not only control but also bind them. This social bonding is so important, that many proposals in the form of theories may be impervious to rational testing since they imply a change in behaviour.

Culture

Various behaviours, implicit or explicit, can be placed on the values continuum. Not everyone will put them in the same place. Take a simple example; expenses for travel and/or overnight accommodation. Does the organisation have set rates, are they fair and what are the procedures for claiming? Does this demonstrate that the organisation trusts you? There is no guarantee that any system will be perceived as fair and honest. However, if you rate such incidences you may find that some people regard them towards the fair end, others towards the unfair end. You may end up with a distribution of views about an organisation as follows:
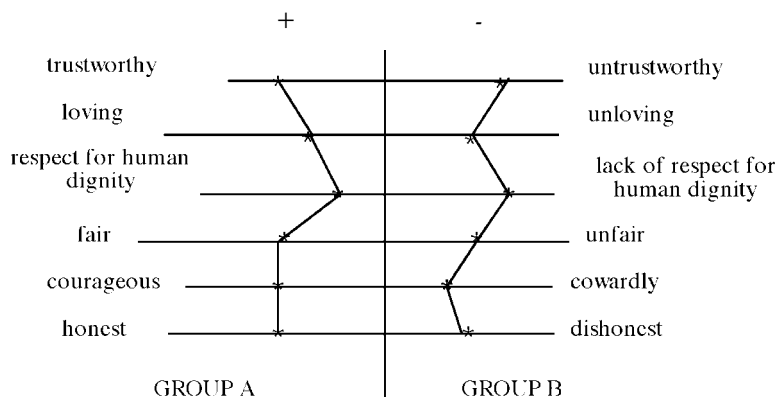
Group A and Group B form two different CULTURES. A culture is formed when people share assumptions about whether behaviours demonstrate positive or negative values, in other words they share mythologies. A leader must be aware that such cultures exist and how people come to such conclusions. Mythologies may in certain instances transcend more obvious grouping, e.g. according to class, rank, religion, profession, etc. In fact one way of describing stereotyping is to associate mythologies with such groups: "all women think that is unfair", "that's typical of soldiers", "no officer would be so dishonest", "trust an academic to see that as uncaring". Thus simplified categories, although making the world a more predictable place and hence more comfortable, are just not subtle enough for a good leader. The leader is in grave danger of misinterpreting and misrepresenting motives and intentions of subordinates and consequently losing credibility and their confidence.

In any organisation it is critical to be able to predict people's behaviour and likely response to situations. The leader must be aware of how people are likely to react and be prepared for such reactions. It is not only the leader's responsibility to be aware of various cultures but to create a culture - one where the resulting actions are productive. If the group perceives the leader's actions and instructions as unfair, dishonest or cowardly they will not follow for long. This does not imply outright insubordination, rebellion or mutiny. There is a myriad of ways in which people who feel untrusted and devalued can grind the group and/or organisation to a halt. The most obvious way is working to rule or simply doing what they are told, sometimes termed "malicious compliance".

In other words the leader depends upon the initiative of the group members. That is, an active understanding of and identification with the purpose and the willingness to use common sense in carrying out tasks. "Followers" are not passive automata "following orders" but willing participants choosing to go in the same direction as the leader. This psychological difference is essentially why there is no real meaning to the defence of "I was following orders" as if that is all that is required.

The leader who continually explicitly falls back on the apparent authority of the role: "do it because I say so", "I am the boss", "I can tell you because it is in my job description" is failing as a leader. This is not to say that job descriptions or clear authority are not important. They are, but rather to clarify the work of a role.1 Also there will be instances where all leaders remind or insist on their authority; in an emergency, to break a log-jam of discussion, etc. Such actions will not necessarily shift the perceptions of the leader to the negative ends of the scale of shared values; in such instances the failure to act could shift perceptions to the negative, especially on courage, honesty and trust-worthiness. Understanding the mutual perceptions of people, or social processes is critical for a leader.

In Western industrialised society women are often better at understanding these social processes than men. This may be due to the socialisation process where girls are allowed and encouraged to pay attention to relationships; who is likely to do what and why, who is friendly with whom and why. This is sometimes demeaned as "gossip". Boys, on the other hand, are encouraged to relate to objects and mechanistic processes such as cars or computers. The advent of equal opportunities for women should not be seen as some patronising way of allowing women a fair chance, to help them, but may offer the opportunity to increase the leadership capability in organisations.

Capability

Often leaders are described as people with vision. This has to do with the intellectual capability or cognitive power of the individual. Professor Elliott Jaques defines cognitive power as "'the maximum scale and complexity of the world which an individual is able to pattern and construe, including the amount and complexity of the information that must be processed in doing so."1 Jaques and colleagues have found discrete problem solving methodologies which form a hierarchical pattern.2 The differences in human problem solving methodologies allow an individual to act at one level, articulate and encompass the levels below, and understand at least one level up.

The visionary element, so often noted in great leaders, appears to be related to the size of the world they pattern and construe. To be a leader at all requires cognitive power at least one level above that of the followers. Greater distance from the followers leads to greater attribution of "vision" since the person "sees" and articulates the world which the followers cannot "see" and cannot fully comprehend. Much of the work on situational leadership may reflect differences in the cognitive power of the leaders rather than differences in the situation.3

Leadership in Action

Leadership, good and bad, is demonstrated through personal behaviour as perceived through the lens of others mythologies. It is also demonstrated through organisational systems and the management of symbols. Behaviour, systems and symbols are the tools of leadership.

Systems

Systems are the ways in which an organisation operates. All organisational systems have embedded within them values which will be interpreted through the mythologies of the people who are subject to them. Many systems are concerned with managing people; recruitment, selection, induction, promotion, discipline, remuneration, task setting, planning, retirement, redundancy.

One of the main issues facing any organisation is the amount of consideration put into the design of such systems. The implementation of any system, or change of a system, will have an impact on mythologies and therefore where an organisation or leader is placed on the scale of shared values.4 This is true even of systems which appear to be less directly associated with managing people: computer systems, information systems, financial systems, and so on. In fact all systems are "the formulated process of a relationship for the transfer of information between two or more people".5 As such, leaders must pay a great deal of attention to the design and implementation of systems. They are never neutral. Everyone in the organisation will have a view concerning the systems and they will be explicitly or implicitly rated on the values continua. People engage with or disassociate from and undermine systems according to whether they think they are fair, courageous and honest.

Therefore it is not simply a question of whether the system is logical, technically correct, or elegantly designed, but how members of the organisation perceive it. There are two major problems with regard to systems.

1. They are designed at too low a level. The complexity, impact and perception of systems are not clearly understood and they are delegated too far down in the organisation.

2. They are given to "experts'. Instead of experts being clearly in the role of advisors with final and public accountability for implementation being seen to be that of the leader, the accountability is shifted onto the expert, sometimes an outsider. This takes away one of the main responsibilities of the leader; to understand the mythologies of the group and design and implement systems accordingly.6

Leaders who misunderstand the ways in which people perceive systems will be at a loss to see why they are by passed or the system is simply not used.

Creating and Changing Cultures

Leadership, good or bad, is the demonstration of values through personal behaviour and the creation of systems as seen through the lens of the mythologies of the followers. It is not simply a matter of understanding these processes, it is acting on them. A culture may be defined as a set of mythologies through which there is a common interpretation of behaviour. Leaders may take over organisations which may have a single culture or multiple cultures and these may be weak or strong. Whatever the situation a leader is required to create a culture, and further a culture which is not based upon fundamentalist propositions. That is, to avoid closed systems which are unable to change and adapt to new circumstances. A leader must create a living culture.

A leader cannot guarantee that within the group there is a predominant culture, nor that such a culture is in the interests of the group in terms of supporting the organisational objectives and purposes. In understanding myths the leader must be aware of how the group perceives him or her and how these myths help or hinder the overall purpose. For example, many organisations, despite the stated intention that merit is the basis for promotion and upgrading, still act onseniority.7 Therefore when young people are promoted over longer serving colleagues it is seen as unfair, and demonstrates that you cannot trust the organisation.

If a leader wants to change mythologies, he or she must create new ones which supersede the old. However people will hark back, often nostalgically, to the good or bad days, which in turn are used to justify new myths.8 A clear example of this was the use of "Winter of Discontent" and the 'power of the unions" in 1979 to establish the, then new, United Kingdom Conservative government and its new economic reality of 'the free market'. Note also how it evoked older myths of "Victorian values" now redefined as acceptable and laudable.

The meaning and definition of symbols is an essential part of leadership. The intense discussions in all organisations over dress, for example, is extremely important and not the trivial matter it is often made out to be. Badges are important not only in terms of recognition but meaning, they indicate values. Symbols indicate different meanings to different cultures, for example the swastika, the hammer and sickle or the stars and stripes. Large companies spend much time and energy on design of logos which they rapidly change when the logo is ridiculed or demonstrates negative values: British Leyland, or the British Labour Party are cases in point.

For a leader almost all of his or her behaviour will be taken as a symbol demonstrating underlying mythologies. Do you dress smartly or casually? Try to be one of the boys? Call someone by their first name? How much infor-

mation do you pass on? Open discussion and free availability of information may indicate you can't cope, can't make your own decisions, are weak, not to be trusted and unfair to burden subordinates. Withholding may also mean exactly the same according to the prevailing myths.

Manipulating symbols and behaviour is no easy matter. It cannot make a good leader in itself. Consistency is essential, and this is almost impossible to contrive. A single instance of behaviour which reinforces the old myths may undermine efforts to change and expose a dishonest manager who is trying to mislead the group. Inconsistency is not tolerated until the new myth is established by which time the relationship has been forged.

Systems for Change

The myth about people's resistance to change is based on poor leadership. Rate of change is dependent upon understanding and acting upon myths and the effective use of behaviour and symbols to demonstrate positive shared values. However, it would be wrong to associate these changes solely with the personal behaviour of the leader. Indeed, this model is an attempt to move on from the idea that personality is the prime determinant of good leadership.

It is the systems and change of systems which have the most effect. They are interpreted as demonstrating how the organisation values its members. A leader makes significant gains and losses by changing systems. Whenever a system is to be changed the leader should know how the current system is interpreted with regard to its values. As systems operate all the time there is no avoidance of this issue; to continue with a system implies agreement.

Two Types of System

There is another important factor when considering change. Not all systems are the same. They can be divided into two types.

I.   Systems that Differentiate. Includes all those systems which demonstrate how members are different. The most powerful is pay. However, there are many others, at what point you receive privileges - company cars, larger office, new grading, promotion. Uniforms, roles, different accountabilities all serve to show some people are different from others.

II. Systems that Equalise. Includes all those which demonstrate how people are the same. These of course vary with the organisation but may include equal dining facilities, no special car parking arrangements, safety regulations.

The most powerful impact on mythologies is made when the leader shifts a system from one type to another. That is, where a system of differentiation becomes one of equalisation or vice-versa. Some leaders or managers will not realise what they are doing and be surprised at the response to "such a small change".

A leader will achieve significant changes if he or she can identify which systems are perceived to be unfair, dishonest, show a lack of trust, etc. If a leader can identify one which all the significant people perceive in the

same way, i.e. negatively, he or she must change it, however apparently small or insignificant. Further, if such a change can be made by movement across the boundary from equalisation to differentiation or vice-versa this will begin to create a new culture.

An example of this was when a new commander took over the Commando Engineer Squadron mentioned at the beginning of this article. The commander recognised that there was a feeling of discontent amongst the soldiers that appeared to be centred on different rules for wearing boots. Officers could wear any boots, provided they were black, soldiers had to wear issue service boots. Whilst this was not a high profile issue and of little significance to the officers the soldiers considered it to be unfair and symbolic of the way they felt they were treated. The commander changed this rule and allowed the soldiers to operate under the same dress regulations as the officers. This made an immediate and positive change to the moral of the unit by demonstrating that the leader understood what was important to the soldiers and thereby increased his credibility and assisted the acceptance of other changes that were being introduced. This system change, from one of differentiation to equalisation worked well in this case because it fitted to culture of a commando unit. However one cannot guarantee that specific actions can always bring about positive change. It would have been unlikely to have had the same positive effect in a Guards or Cavalry unit where soldiers might well consider these differences very positively. In fact any officer who did dress the same as them might have been regarded with mistrust.

In order to create new myths the leader must behave in ways which contradict the prevailing myth, e.g. that "managers will exploit employees at every opportunity", "union representatives are out for themselves", "senior army officers are out of touch with the modern world". Acting in ways which contradict these mythologies creates uncertainty. The predictable world is challenged. This causes discomfort and if old myths can no longer be sustained new hypotheses will be constructed to explain the new situation. Providing that this behaviour remains consistent new myths will be established. "Our manager does not exploit us", "Our representative puts our views forward even if it is not his/her direct interest", "This Army Board member really does understand the modern world."3

Symbols

A leader may not need or be able to change myths across the whole organisation. Moving higher in a complex organisational structure means that the creation of a culture becomes more complex, involving larger numbers of people. In many situations the leader cannot make all his or her behaviour directly available. This is where symbols play a great part. Symbols are the outward manifestation of the valuing process. They include the obvious - flags, medals, badges - but also clothing, gestures, rituals and non-verbal behaviour. If there is any conflict between words and behaviour, people will interpret meaning from behaviour. It is difficult to persuade someone you are listening, if you don't look at them or persuade workers that safety comes first when their manager's performance rating is based solely on quantity of production and not penalised by number of lost time incidents.

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