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## **IT'S TIME TO RETHINK LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: BUILDING MOMENTUM FOR A LEADERSHIP CULTURE**

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Leadership excellence is fundamental to the health and performance of an organisation. Leadership development, however, in most cases is a costly affair. It therefore warrants careful consideration of what organisations hope to achieve when they invest in leadership development. If the point of departure is to help people excel as highly competent individuals, then the criteria for a development programme would be different from one where the goal is to grow people in order to achieve more with and through others – in other words true leadership and teamwork.

### **Changing perceptions and expectations of leadership**

Times change and so do the perceptions and expectations of leadership. If we lived in ancient times when progress meant territorial dominance and hard, hand-fought victories on the battlefield, we would be looking for strong, brave and imposing men with some ability to out-think the enemy. If we lived in the industrial age we would be looking for superior scientific minds. As the world became more ordered, specialised and hierarchically structured in governments, institutions, business and many others types of organisations; technical or functional ability and political astuteness (skilful in tactics and power play) allowed many to rise to the top and thus be recognised as leaders. In this scenario, leadership is typically exercised through *command and control* complimented by concomitant tactics of intimidation and manipulation. Unfortunately, there are far too many examples with this type of leadership and organisations may be stuck in this old mindset.

### **Instruments of power**

Where command and control still delivers results, the people have resigned themselves to the idea that they are fundamentally either stronger or weaker instruments of power - in some cases they paint themselves powerless for life, in others they believe they are untouchable and as a result often ruin their personal relationships. They fear or respect power for the sake of power. Where those at the top embrace the culture -- and why would they not if they were successful in and beneficiaries of it -- they will more likely than not, consciously or unconsciously, further entrench this culture through the choices they make on training and development. It does not bode well for the future in a world where optimum learning, flexibility and responsiveness are such important factors for success.

### **The cost**

The cost for organisations, and more specifically, when the leadership are poorly aligned with societal changes is immeasurably high. Today's knowledge worker commits themselves when they experience the freedom to be creative and enterprising. In a command and control environment they feel inhibited and frustrated; the result being untapped potential. Moreover, people in such an environment often withhold critical information which ultimately comes at a cost to the organisation.

Another cost factor is that employees who are not intrinsically motivated but prepared to submissively and passively 'sit out' their careers for the sake of a salary cheque, are nowadays difficult and expensive to get rid of. The longer we have command and control environments (as it is experienced by the common worker, since it is seldom acknowledged by the leadership), the more disengaged people will become. Progressive organisations, understand what is required of a modern-day leader, and are quickly pulling away from their counterparts who continue to practice the archaic *command and control* tactics.

## The key shift

Who do we regard as good leaders? Who is climbing the ladder to higher positions of authority and power? Who gets the benefit of the doubt when it comes to filling leadership positions? Is it not those with a strong knowledge base as reflected in their academic qualifications and other certificates? Is it not those with technical know-how and management experience? And is it not those who have demonstrated the ability to use their positional power to get quick results? We believe these are the three criteria most people have in mind when they consider candidates for leadership positions. Whoever fits the bill, can be forgiven if he or she feels superior to the rest. The combination of high intellect, know-how, tactical skill and a robust ego is a powerful one. It is almost inevitable that the leadership challenge ends up to be no more than a battle of wits and ego's in budget, planning and strategy sessions. Teamwork, the key to success, suffers as a result.

How would leadership development programmes be of any use for the above? If it means another qualification to go on the manager's CV, more ideas, theories, models and arguments for the meeting room, and perhaps some insights that could improve personal effectiveness, then it will fit the requirement well. *But the question that needs to be asked above all is: what is the value for the organisation as a whole?* What is the positive influence on those who work with the leader, their morale, energy, focus, productivity, willingness to take responsibility, innovativeness, and own leadership development? Furthermore, what are the ethical and governance values being driven by the organisation and its leaders, and do management support these? And then, what are the positive changes that others see in terms of the manager's willingness to sacrifice for the cause, openness to feedback, team-orientation, his/her courage to name the real issues that prevent growth in the organisation, and work towards much needed transformation?

### *i. Culture eats strategy for lunch*

The observation is widespread that in spite of various leadership development initiatives, the change that matters most, invariably does not take place. In others words, a change of leadership culture is required and is not being done. More sophisticated strategies, better designs, and the latest performance management tools or tactics to out-manoeuvre the opposition, can never achieve what a strong leadership culture can. What most people in 'unhealthy organisations' secretly or openly hope to see, is a change of heart in their leadership.

The reason for poor or inadequate performance in organisations very seldom is lack of knowledge, skills or experience. Rather, it is to be found in the leader's lack of attention to behavioural aspects, the general climate, and the alignment in the organisation. When leaders really concern themselves with the character of their organisation, they forget about their ego concerns and personal agendas. To use an analogy from the sports world, we know that when we are in agreement that the team showed character it also means they gave their hearts for the team and the greater cause. Poor character is when a team member puts his own interests before those of the team.

Leadership development for our times need to be in the areas of awareness, 'inner work' (self-mastery) and context-sensitive leadership responses.

### *ii. Awareness*

It is to state the obvious that heightened levels of awareness is needed for real change in mindset, attitude and behaviour. As the emotional intelligence expert Daniel Goleman points out, self-awareness forms the cornerstone for awareness of others, self-regulation and regulation of inter-personal relationships. As obvious and simple as it seems, it is not a given. As a starting point it requires openness, vulnerability and humility to grow in self-awareness. With the 'chips' of knowledge, experience and positional power on one's shoulder, the tendency is very high to filter out signals that might be damaging to the ego.

The three main areas for awareness are *personal disposition and discipline, adaption to and need for change, and relationships*. The defining, breakthrough moment that leads to heightened awareness and sets 'inner work' in motion, often is the understanding that the use of outside help -- typically from family members to friends, colleagues, books, coaches and mentors -- is not a sign of weakness, but of becoming more authentic and mature.

*iii. Inner work (self-mastery)*

Awareness is one thing, but challenging conversations with oneself is another. As all exemplary leaders will testify, the 'make or break' in their growth as leaders were the challenges they put to themselves in response to the challenges they experienced from the outside; be they tragedies, major disappointments, lack of results, personal attacks on them, honest but hurtful feedback or overwhelming responsibility. Sometimes 'inner work' demands nothing short of a deep and painful 'inner journey' - going back to unresolved issues and unhealed pain of the past. But most of the time it is nothing as dramatic as that, but being intentional and committed to grow as a person and a leader in all the many wonderful facets of being human.

*iv. Context-sensitive leadership responses (use of inner wisdom)*

Key to leadership and leadership development is the ability to respond appropriately and more wisely to all kinds of situations. That is why awareness and inner work is so important. To think that reading textbooks will help the leader to do the right thing or minimise damage is shortsighted. Leadership in its proper sense is authentic, spontaneous and from within. Whatever knowledge the leader comes across, it needs to be internalised to make any real and meaningful difference. A leader that has grown out of the command and control style learns the critical importance of adjustment. For instance, to be forceful, courageous and bold is important in leadership. But the context determines when it is appropriate and most effective. Bright ideas at the wrong time or with an insensitive presentation in a particular context can be totally counter-productive. The key to becoming wiser is to consciously and intentionally keep all channels of feedback and learning open. When we are open and receptive to our environment and to others, our eyes 'open' to the wisdom that we have within but never allowed to guide us. It is at the point where we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, not all-knowing and self-important, that we rise to new levels of understanding and insight.

From a leadership development perspective, it is much more effective to explore leadership responses in conversation with others who share the same context (facing their 'real world') than listening to leadership theory in a lecture room. It is a common complaint that the good and lofty ideas in the lecture room come to nothing the moment a person is back at the office facing 'the real world'. It is different when leaders in a development programme support each other by sharing their leadership thoughts and questions as they face the challenges before them.

For healthy workplace and social structures to thrive, leadership development should facilitate growth in the areas of awareness, 'inner work' and context-sensitive leadership responses. As illustrated below, in many cases a shift in thinking about leadership development from an outdated paradigm needs to take place.

OLD CRITERIA AND DEVELOPMENT FOCUS	DEVELOPMENT FOCUS FOR ORGANISATIONAL HEALTH
Knowledge	Awareness
Experience	Inner work (reflection and self-challenge)
Strategic and tactical skills	Context-sensitive leadership responses (use of inner wisdom)
Strategy before culture	Culture before strategy
Change of processes and tools	Change of heart and attitude
Advocacy	Questioning and shared learning
Good for transactional environment	Needed for transformational environment

## Less is more

The best way to grow a leadership culture is to further develop those who already have a positive influence in the organisation. The questions to ask in order to identify them are the following:

- Is the person clearly passionate about the cause and values of the organisation?
- Is it evident that he does not need and does not have to rely on the power of his position to be able to have significant influence?
- Does he genuinely want to become a better leader?
- Would he be keen to play a part in building a strong leadership culture in the organisation?
- Is he loyal to the organisation, and will he be part of the organisation for at least for the next two to three years?

Such a group of leaders will have an enormous impact if they purposefully support each other and grow their leadership according to the above-stated development principles for organisational health. A wholesale approach where everyone at a certain level is included in a development programme can at times disappoint in terms of its impact for the organisation. Half-motivated people who participate under some form of internal or external pressure dilute the value. As a strategy to grow a leadership culture, a focused approach with a core of motivated people delivers far better and more sustainable results for the organisation.

## The example of Nelson Mandela

Late last year, the world appeared to stand still and reflect on the remarkable life and example of Nelson Mandela. One of the most striking and powerful illustrations of his leadership influence is that so many people recalled that nobody could turn down his requests - a manager's dream! It is the best possible illustration of the truth of John Maxwell's axiom: *a leader first gives his heart then asks for a hand*. The belief that, particularly business leaders, need to hide their hearts from others (and themselves) in order to take hard, calculated decisions and remain resolute in negotiation, is wrong and in truth undermining of their leadership. Passion for and dedication to the cause, is a matter of the heart. And so respect for others, the will to serve -- humility -- the willingness to ask forgiveness, care, trust, compassion, moral conviction, resilience and perseverance are indeed matters of the heart.

Surely, if we recognise leadership excellence in the person of Nelson Mandela, we should endeavour to look for and grow the qualities he lived and demonstrated. For organisations it is not a call to become more 'touchy or feely', but to responsibly address the context within which business decisions are taken and to ensure that these decisions accurately reflect the organisation's heart, mind and soul, be this in its strategy, finance, marketing, technology and corporate social values.

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The CGF leadership development process is built on the above-stated views. It includes the following: The heartstyles assessment ([www.heartstyles.com](http://www.heartstyles.com)), the 32 leadership principles online programme ([www.newlead.co.za/corporate-offering](http://www.newlead.co.za/corporate-offering)), individual coaching and group learning facilitation.

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