

Getting Real About Leadership

A series of challenges to the way we think about Leadership and Organisation Development

The Personification of Leadership

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What Really Leads Us?

No-one could blame us for thinking that organisations, and the people within them, are run by leaders. We're told this in the management books that arrive on the shelves every day of the week, the articles that are posted on social media, and the armies of leadership developers who literally make it their business to construct this narrative. But much about this story doesn't ring true.

Firstly, this would assume that what motivates us, and what inspires us to act in the workplace, is extrinsic to us; that it sits outside of us. It assumes that an external force, namely the boss, or the most senior person in the room, is the reason why we do what we do, and in the ways that we do them. This jars with all that we know about intrinsic motivation which conveys the idea that leadership, in fact, comes from within.

Echoing the recent work of Daniel Pink, Frederick Herzberg, more than 50 years ago, made his position clear:

“True motivation comes from achievement, personal development and job satisfaction.”

But even if we were to put aside intrinsic motivation, and acknowledge that factors outside of us have a role to play, then why, oh why, do we insist that the individuals we might call leaders are the principal source of this leadership?

The Organisational Fish Tank

Bill Tate, founder of the Institute for Systemic Leadership speaks to this idea of extrinsic leadership:

“If we liken the organisation and its people to a fish tank, what do we see? The matter of how clean, clear, safe and nutritious the system is affects whether the occupants shine... We observe pecking orders... We see species whose job it is to clear up the mess at the bottom, and those who service the hygiene needs of those ‘higher up’... We see how the food chain represents the hierarchical power structure... There is food for good behaviour... While some [behaviours] seem rational, there are

other things that are dark and in the shadows”

This metaphor beautifully captures the complexity of the sources of leadership found in the fish tank that while including the individuals we typically call leaders, it recognizes them as only one force amongst many that encompass the organisational structure, the culture, the reward systems, work allocation and so on. Leadership is expressed by the organisational system, and it is the system, **in all its variety**, that moves us.

The “Great” Misdirection by Leadership Developers

The problem is that we have lent far too heavily on the idea that organisations can be changed, can be led, and can be run by a small number of what would have to be supremely powerful individuals; namely those individuals that we call leaders.

Leadership developers (and we acknowledge that we are one of this clan), have to accept some of the blame for this deception. We have effectively ‘personified’ leadership making it all about the qualities of personal effectiveness that leaders need to possess, or more disingenuously, that leaders need to develop, in order to deliver this Herculean task; a task that was always out of reach, and always about much more than personal qualities. In doing so we have managed to let in once again the heroic ‘Great Man Theory’, this time through the back door, and may even have contributed to an epidemic of ‘Impostor Syndrome’. And if you doubt that the ‘Great Man

Theory’ of leadership is alive and kicking, just scan the shelves of any bookstore (virtual or otherwise), or the blogs found on social media for the contiguous use of the words ‘great’ and ‘leadership’; it’s rife.

A Realistic Approach

How then should we approach leadership? We’d like to suggest:

1. **Shift attention away from the term ‘leader’ with all the unhelpful baggage it brings, and instead towards the concept of ‘leadership’.** This appropriately lets into the work a broader range of forces - intrinsic and extrinsic - that lead and inspire organisational outcomes
2. **Strengthen capabilities in systemic thinking.** In almost all cases organisational systems will be more powerful than the individuals that pass through them. Time is well spent in thinking systemically and developing the approaches to intervene in the system where needed. The likes of Warner Burke and Bob Marshak offer some helpful insights into this.
3. **Replace the notion of ‘great leadership’ with the more realistic and helpful concept of ‘skilled leadership’.** This directs attention away from personal traits and qualities towards the work that needs to be done and the skills needed to be successful. Thankfully there’s no space for heroes here.

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Robin's experience spans the private, public and not-for-profit sector working with individuals, senior teams and helping to drive organisational change. Robin's particular strengths lie in the areas of senior level leadership, strategic thinking and the development of modern organisation design. Robin is an innovative thinker and Visiting Fellow of one of the world's leading business schools, Ashridge Business School, Head of Leadership with the Oxford Group, he is a Director with the Australia & New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) and a Fellow of New South Wales' Health Education & Training Institute. Robin has written four books on leadership and organisational behaviour published with Palgrave Macmillan, Wiley & Sons and Kogan Page. Contact Robin on robin@robinrydeconsulting.com



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Having worked with a broad spectrum of companies – from advertising creatives to pharmaceutical companies to leaders of financial services – Lisa works with senior executives on their trickiest challenges. Lisa is a member of the International Coaching Federation, and specializes in areas of leadership resilience, coping with transition and helping leaders deal with intractable issues. Lisa is a Programme Director with Advance HE, works closely with and teaches on the Clore Social Fellowship Programme. Lisa is also an executive coach with the Oxford Group. Lisa co-authored "Creating Authentic Organizations" (Kogan Page, 2014) and has published numerous articles in journals such as Training Journal. Contact Lisa on lisa@robinrydeconsulting.com

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