

Getting Real About Leadership

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

For this issue of Getting Real About Leadership, we are delighted to welcome guest contributor Kai Peters, Pro-Vice Chancellor of Business & Law at Coventry University

Primum Non Nocere (First, Do No Harm)

Kai Peters

3000 Leadership Books and Rising

Somewhere north of 3000 books on leadership are published annually. A quick check on Amazon this morning of some of the recent or best-selling offerings brings up books on leadership according to Burger King; the Special Forces; the Bible; Jack Welch (still); Trump; Churchill; and the ever so bonkers 'Leadership, Assholes, Blockchain and You'. Bless.

When one tries to put some sort of taxonomy on this literature, there are lots of 'heroic leader' biographies covering the usual ground of traits, charisma, and aphorisms. Then there is a whole written wheelbarrow of 'how to...' guides – be authentic, be organised, be inspirational, or as Machiavelli has said, paraphrasing here 'it's best to be loved and feared, but if you have to choose, be feared'.

What is harder to find is something which provides a thinking framework which is simple enough to keep in

mind, which is also ethically sound, and which is also evidence-based.

Do No Harm

Some years ago, together with Lynda Gratton and Julian Birkinshaw of London Business School, I was invited along to the House of Commons for an all-party parliamentary talking shop about leadership in UK organisations. We came up with a simple concept that has served me well since - leadership is about sense-making on the one hand, and change management on the other. In and of itself though, that is not enough. It needs to be embedded within a framework of intent. That, for me, is an amalgamation of Jeremy Bentham's 'greatest amount of good for the greatest number' and Socrates' *primum non nocere* – 'do no harm'.

Let me now unpick and expand on my simplification.

Sense-making is easier said than done. Making sense of the past is hard enough. Making sense of the present

and the future is a big ask. One can nevertheless make a significant effort to do so. No leader is omniscient. In our academic environments and anywhere else really, one needs to talk to staff, students, and colleagues across the organisation. One needs, importantly, to speak with colleagues in other institutions across the whole spectrum of the HE environment, not only in the UK but as far afield as one can manage. Sense-making is cumulative. Cook-Greuter's maturation framework which is based on Piaget's model of cognitive development provides sensible suggestions on expanding one's arsenal of experience so that one can reach a thoughtful, dispassionate analysis of what a realistic future may look like.

Turbulence Lies Ahead

For all of us in higher education, I expect that Covid-19, student reluctance and inability to travel, the geopolitics of populism, Brexit, climate change, and the unprecedented spike in unemployment and the equally unprecedented economic contraction point collectively to carnage in the coming years. In the great recession of 2008, the economy contracted by about 5% and it took until 2012 for the economy to return to pre-2008 levels. We are now looking at a 15% contraction. Logically, that means 12 years waiting for a recovery. It will be different in different industries and countries, but it will be ugly.

So how do we, as leaders, behave if we buy into this analysis? Well, we keep Bentham and Socrates in mind. When I speak to my colleagues, I can see that many of them have not arrived at this conclusion. They listen to politicians

who promise the sunny uplands of loosening lockdowns and the return of glory once the shackles of the EU have been removed.

Beyond Denial

For a long time, I was chief executive at Ashridge where we did a lot of work on change management with individuals and organisations. One of the tools we used as a thinking prompt was of an adaptation of Janssen's House of Change whereby one moved from denial (where I think most people are right now) through confusion (lots there too) through renewal and ultimately contentment with a new reality.

As leaders today, we need to chivvy people along past denial and depression towards genuinely thinking about how we can do the greatest good for the greatest number while trying to do no harm, or as little harm as possible. We all know that not all colleagues will survive the inevitable restructuring of higher education. We can already see the redundancy tsunami announcements today.

We now need to balance financial prudence to ensure organisational survival with preserving positions as well as we can. We also need to really think about how we can be kind and helpful for those colleagues who will no longer be colleagues in the coming months and years. In addition to individual institutions contracting, there will no doubt also be some consolidation in higher education. The carrying cost for all of the infrastructure and bureaucracy we all face unfortunately takes a greater toll on smaller institutions than on larger

ones which can spread costs across greater income streams.

A Pyramid of Trust

There is another angle to sense-making and change management that I'd like to emphasise. While enlightened leadership can make sense of the environment, encouraging appropriate change management cannot be done single-handedly. An organisation is a social construct of conversation. Spans of control, in reality, mean that an individual can regularly have conversations with a team of somewhere between 7 and 15 people. In our large organisations, this means that we must create a pyramid of trust to ensure information and

understanding is shared. For anyone leading any team, this means they must trust people in their teams. If they don't, they must firstly try to develop them, and if that fails, move them along. When a manager micro-manages beyond their own remit, it just messes everything up.

There is nothing more annoying than decisions being made by blustering buffoons who think they know everything when they haven't a clue. Sadly, there are more than a few of those folks running countries right now. I'll leave it to anyone foolish enough to read this blog to reflect on the quality of their own organisational leadership in these increasingly difficult times.

Kai Peters is Pro-Vice-Chancellor of Business & Law and international development at Coventry University and a member of the Coventry University Group Leadership Team. Previously, he was Dean/Director of Ashridge, the business school located in Berkhamsted, near London from 2003 to 2015. Following the 2015 strategic alliance of Ashridge with Hult International Business School, Peters was appointed Chief Academic Officer of the combined institution. Prior to joining Ashridge, Peters was Dean, and previously director of MBA programs, of the Rotterdam School of Management (RSM) of Erasmus University in the Netherlands from 1993 to 2003. In addition to academic activities, he chairs GAIA, an e-Health company in Hamburg, Germany and is on the advisory board of NewsConsole, an artificial intelligence / big data company in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Peters has written or co-written 10+ books and chapters, and 50+ academic and practitioner articles on leadership and management education including *Steward Leadership: A Maturational Perspective* in 2013 and *Rethinking Business Schools* in 2018. He holds degrees from York University, Toronto and University of Quebec in Chicoutimi; (Canada) and Erasmus University (Netherlands).

Contact Kai on kai.peters@coventry.ac.uk



The Getting Real About Leadership Series is brought to you by Robin Ryde Consulting Ltd who provide senior team development, coaching and OD Consultancy. The consultancy is led by Robin Ryde and Lisa Sofianos who work with a broad range of clients across multiple sectors in the UK and internationally.

Robin Ryde is a former CEO, HR Director and Board member.

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



Lisa Sofianos is a business author, executive coach and leadership developer.



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

If you are interested in talking to us about these ideas or the work we do please get in touch with us robin@robinrydeconsulting.com and lisa@robinrydeconsulting.com