

Getting Real About Leadership

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

Facing into Uncomfortable Realities

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Helping you Face New Realities

At this time of Brexit and pandemic, it's important to avoid platitude or glibness when talking about how leaders should be responding. We can take as read that they are very aware of the level of challenge that the current environment is presenting hour by hour. However, Peter Drucker's quote has particular resonance right now;

"The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday's logic."

Ronald Heifetz, one of the originators of the Adaptive Leadership approach, takes this thinking further, maintaining that in chaotic and unprecedented times, leaders cannot be seduced by the familiarity of business-as-usual solutions and must let go of existing plans, hopes and dreams to do the uncomfortable, but essential, work of facing in to the difficult realities. Once they have come to terms and engaged with the new reality, they can begin the work on focussing organisational attention and effort on constructing a

more appropriate way forward. And this process can't happen soon enough.

There's no doubt that many of us are in this difficult space right now, caught between the unfolding shock of new circumstances and the pressing realities of how to deal with them.

Doing Being Ordinary

While leaders and managers are who most others in an organisation will look to for calm direction in difficult times, they are also human and subject to the same psychological processes as anyone else. The Sociologist Harvey Sacks talks about the strong cognitive bias in all of us to ascribe quotidian explanations to the extraordinary in a process he calls, "*doing being ordinary*". Our brains are configured to fold the new, novel or shocking into a business as usual mindset. In a more normal operating environment this is a problem for leaders, but in turbulent times when leaders need to get to grips with reality quickly, this is a real risk.

Organisational culture can also sing a siren song to leaders, entrenching them in ideas that certain activities or directions are off the table as, “not the way we do things around here” and even “not how we think about things around here.” This may have contributed to the handling of the Covid-19 crisis, for example, the apparent invisibility, at least for a critical few weeks, of migrant worker dormitories in Singapore, and the serious outbreak in UK care homes.

With the large-scale global move of hundreds of millions of employees from working in offices to working from home, we see long-standing cultural tenets being exploded. But importantly it took a global pandemic to disabuse leaders and managers of the notion that it was not possible at scale.

At this moment, we have a picture of leaders, potentially isolated in their own homes, dealing on a personal and professional level with an unfolding and radical situation like nothing we have ever experienced, needing to face difficult realities and subject to psychological processes that want to pull them back into the familiar territory of “yesterday’s logic”.

Powerful Questions to Ask Yourself

Perhaps you should consider asking yourself questions along these lines:

1. **What realities are you not currently facing?** For example, that the organisational strategy might, in fact, need to radically change
2. **What might you need to let go of in order to move forward?** For example, an important personal project in which you have invested time and energy, but now needs to go on the back burner
3. **What parts of your culture are holding you back?** For example, does your organisational culture need to become more comfortable with failure and error in order to encourage experimentation?

Notwithstanding their isolation, leaders cannot answer these questions alone. They also need to put in place the conditions to hold the provocative and challenging conversations that can move them out of their comfort zones and into the uncomfortable reality. This requires dialogue with their teams, colleagues, coaches and mentors to begin this work along with a whole new way of communicating to balance challenge, accountability and trust.

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

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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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