

PERFORMANCE ARCHITECT

LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING



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BY ANDREW SIMON

Former US President J. F Kennedy once stated that “leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.” It seems an authentic statement for him to make, as JFK was an active lifelong learner. Even as President, he read constantly and widely, was a student of history, reflected deeply, recorded his learnings and reflections in numerous diaries and notebooks and was a sharp listener.

Germany’s longest serving Chancellor Angela Merkle is too an example of a national (and global) leader who is constantly learning. Her biographer Kati Marton¹ attributes her leadership longevity to her insatiable curiosity, thriving on the new and the interesting, her interest in people, history, problems to untangle, and travel.

While the idea that leadership and learning are indispensable to each other might make intuitive sense to good leaders and those of us working in the field of leadership development, it is not something that is commonly seen. It’s easy to note for example, how so many politicians in positions of authority and leadership readily display the hallmarks of neglected learning. This includes arrogance, stubbornness, ignorance, and lack of empathy.

Sadly, we see similar hallmarks in many organisations, where many leaders especially at middle levels, display a strong reluctance for learning and downplay its importance to their own performance and wellbeing and that of their teams and organisations. For these people, the urgency of day-to-day work and the ‘crazy busy’ of their days appear to be the prized hallmarks of their work as leaders.

“Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.”

- John F. Kennedy

Learning to be better leaders is often hard continual work. It involves a conscious effort to be present, open,

curious, to actively engage, to examine one's own biases and assumptions and to reflect on one's experience critically. It entails commitment to improved skill and practices, deep personal change, and better ways of leading. It requires being accountable to oneself and to one's team and organisation.

Many people, especially in positions of middle management are somewhat ill prepared for the challenge of learning and indeed unlearning, let alone for the actual task of leadership.

A recent study by the Centre for Creative Leadership² (CLC) of over 10,000 people across 28 countries, the majority of whom have participated in leadership development activities, found that younger people can be discouraged from stepping into leadership roles. For example:

- **46% feel that they won't have the psychological safety to take risks or make mistakes (as leaders)**
- **40% feel they'll worry too much about leadership responsibilities**
- **37% feel leadership will bring a high degree of stress, and**
- **35% feel that they'll need to give up too much to take on a leadership role**

Leadership is perceived by a significant number of people to be stressful, risky and undesirable. If so, this is a little troubling. All of life is itself a risk and the avoidance of the risks of leadership is an avoidance of an essential part of life. Leadership of course involves risk and hard work, but when exercised for the common good, results in growth and an extension of oneself rather than a sacrifice of the self. Instead of being a source of depletion,

leadership replenishes the self as it does teams communities and organisations.

However, if the CLC research holds true, then it is likely and understandable that many people will not see leadership development as an attractive or desirable thing. Indeed, the 'crazy busy' day to day, might become a familiar comfort that many people will prefer to escape to, rather than to undertake the effort and risk that learning and growing requires.

46%

[of young people surveyed] feel that they won't have the psychological safety to take risks or make mistakes (as leaders)

Others, because of their passivity, learned dependency, fear and even laziness will demand leadership development programs to spoon feed them, to show them every step of the way, and that every step will be safe and worth their while. No leadership development program can do this, for the growth of a leader requires courage, initiative and independence of thought and action.

It does raise the important question of how organisations approach the development of their leaders and who this is targeted at. Traditional mandatory, large-scale programs for example, where everyone at a particular level is required to attend, seem to be both inefficient and ineffective in developing groups or a pipeline of leaders since it is likely that there will be a significant proportion of people who do not wish, or who are not ready, to be leaders and who therefore will not be prepared for the hard, self-directed work that leadership development requires.

It does also raise the important question of how people are promoted or selected into roles where leadership is required. It is all too easy to promote or select people

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for leadership roles whose basis for candidacy is technical expertise or tenure but who may have little desire to lead or the willingness to learn how to.

Indeed, it is determinantal to the potential and the wellbeing of the person concerned, the people that they are required to lead and the broader organisation if they are asked to lead when the willingness to lead and to invest in their own growth, development and wellbeing as leader is weak.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Recognise that leadership is a choice and that not everyone will want to or can make such a choice.
2. Recognise that there may be a significant proportion of people in formal leadership roles who are actually there by accident, or because of their technical expertise, or who are in it for the money or the status. Leadership development programs will not work for them. They will need other forms of attention and support.
3. Refrain from making leadership development programs mandatory. It will result in waste. Self-selection puts choice, ownership and accountability in the hands of people who actually want to and can commit to investing in their growth and development. This will result in solid outcomes and provide visible returns on investment.

¹The Chancellor (2021) Marton, K. Williams Collins. London

²Its not you, its them. Why emerging leaders need your support to succeed. (2021) Centre for Creative Leadership.

Andrew Simon is Managing Director of Yellow Edge (YE). Yellow Edge is a local, privately owned Canberra based consulting company focused on helping individuals, teams and organisations to achieve high performance. Yellow Edge is also a B-Corp applicant. B-Corp companies make decisions that make a positive impact on their employees, customers, suppliers, community, and the environment. www.bcorporation.com.au