

PERFORMANCE ARCHITECT

LOOKING BEYOND
LEADERSHIP
BEHAVIOURS
– AN OPINION



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by Andrew Simon

Limiting our focus on behaviours also exposes us to an even more insidious threat. Prescribed leadership capabilities, skills and behaviours promoted by a plethora of various leadership models are inevitably defined by specific context, a particular point in time and a particular point of view.

Much of contemporary thought and practice in the field of leadership and its development is based on the need to be skilled in its application. After all, leadership is often described as a behavioural science. On the face of it, this seems sound. The business, commercial, educational and political rhetoric and literature around the need to be skilled at leadership has been continuous and unfortunately in my mind at least, boringly consistent. Yet, it appears that the consistent application of effective leadership skills in the workplace and in many other contexts locally and globally still appears to be elusive.

To anyone serious about developing leaders and their craft, this must be a curious if not serious problem, given the importance we place on leaders in many aspects of our lives and the privileged role that we have in helping leaders and the people they lead. Part of the problem however, may be to do with how we chose to define the problem. Thinking of leadership as a primarily skills, capability or behavioural based activity will understandably warrant skill, capability and behavioural based development and attention which can then keep us in an obviously unsatisfactory self reinforcing cycle! But what if we broaden our frame of reference and look at leadership as more than just a bundle of skills or capabilities or behaviours that need simply need developing? What if leadership was also about attitudes, beliefs and dare I say it: a philosophical posture or stance?

LEADERSHIP AND ATTITUDE

In my view, the attitudinal aspect of leadership has been underplayed and underserved, notwithstanding developments in positive psychology and neurology, in particular brain plasticity. Yet if we take attitude to mean the manner in which we act, feel and think that shows one's disposition, then it is very surprising that so little attention is paid to the development of attitudes amongst leaders, given its critical role in actually shaping behaviours and action, so valued in the practical world of leadership. We perhaps assume that those in leadership roles have the "right" or "appropriate" attitudes and all they need is skill development. Yet, if we look closely at our own personal experiences, it becomes noticeable that many successful and unsuccessful leaders are so because of their attitudes or their philosophical stance, which would have given their behaviours coherence, rationale and meaning, and resonance or not with their followers.

Limiting our focus on behaviours also exposes us to an even more insidious threat. Prescribed leadership capabilities, skills and behaviours promoted by a plethora of various leadership models are inevitably defined by specific context, a particular point in time and a particular point of view. The assumption behind such particularity and specificity is one of stasis. That is, the assumption that context and attendant behaviours are relatively static and enduring, and so it is believed, that identified capabilities and behaviours will be sufficient in helping leaders to do what is required. Such a position is untenable in a world that is dynamic, fluid and increasingly complex. Complexity by nature means having issues that are simultaneously vertically integrated and horizontally differentiated. This implies connectivity, but more

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importantly perhaps, symbiotic movement and continual interchange. A change in one aspect has both predictable and unpredictable repercussions across the whole system and in so doing changes the system itself. In such a world, the task is not to simply apply prescribed skills, capabilities and behaviours. Rather, within a particular attitude or philosophical stance, to adapt and change and indeed to rapidly acquire new ways of thinking and behaving in response to or anticipation of movement.

Practical examples of this abound in everyday life.

In the world of team sport, such as football or netball for example, each player on the team has well defined roles and a set of skills and capabilities appropriate to that role, and each player works with their team mates in a collaborative relationship, executing a game plan. What gives high performing teams the winning edge however, is not just the quality of skill, but the quality of the response to the action of the opposing team and how their individual and collective skills, capabilities, relationships and the game plan are adapted or changed to meet and win in unpredictable, challenging situations. The role of the "other" in a context of dynamic relationships such as in a sport, and in the leader's workplace is a significant variable that impacts on a result. One's behaviour or action is simultaneously independent and interdependent and invites some degree of adaption at individual and collective levels. Successful adaptation however, does not take place within an intellectual or attitudinal vacuum. Rather, it takes place within an overall attitude or posture that is open and aware, purposeful and reflexive, which then fuels adaptive behaviour and frees each player (or leader) to adapt and apply themselves in unique situations. The shared attitude gives the team the chance to shape the right outcomes for itself even if the situation is unforeseen, unfamiliar or not according to the game plan.

A similar observation could be made in watching and listening to Jazz bands. Each player is highly skilled in their instrument and whilst they play a piece of music together competently using their individual and collective skills, the best and most enjoyable performers improvise and push the boundaries of skill and collaborative music making. Again, such improvisation does not occur within an attitudinal vacuum, but around a particular shared philosophical stance. Such a stance gives shape and purpose to the improvisation.

Leadership skills are obviously important, but in of themselves, they are insufficient in our world. Having appropriate attitudes which allow anticipation, improvisation, adaptability and rapid learning is critical to navigating, adapting to and overcoming the complexities we find ourselves in.

What if we paid equal (not necessarily more) attention to developing attitudes amongst our leaders? Perhaps it could look like:

- *Trans disciplinary learning*, which expand attitudes, mindsets and headspace. Learning across disciplines and experiencing different genres help develop multiple perspectives contributing to attitudinal development. Philosophy, the Arts, Travel, Neuroscience, the Humanities, Architecture even Fashion, Sport and Film etc. all provide different attitudinal experiences and in of themselves have useful things to say about leadership.
- *Observational learning* from personal experience and the personal stories, live case studies and real world examples that we all have and can bring if the learning space is sufficiently safe.
- *Inclusive, conversation based technologies* structured around issues and dilemmas that lie behind the wicked problems that we confront. This means holding conversations about values, beliefs, assumptions, biases and paradigms.

“A good leader lives at the edge, between now and the next and is able to engage and inspire individuals for the journey across the less travelled landscape to a preferred and optimistic future”

- Paul Getty.

- *Socratic questioning* which encourages leaders to surface and articulate their philosophical stance towards leadership and people how this shapes their practical behaviour.
 - *Action oriented reflection* through simulations and case in point learning which encourage leaders to examine why they behaved the way they did in various situations.
 - *Experiential activities* which allow leaders to step into the shoes of others to experience alternative realities and to develop new perspectives and attitudes.
 - *Attitudinal expanding relationships* where leaders get to know and interact with people with different ways of thinking and different perspectives.
 - *Travel*, where leaders can move meaningfully between different geographic and cultural contexts to experience different attitudes, resultant behaviours and consequent results.
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