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D07 MQIA Papers

D07.01 Practice Leadership and Managing Quality

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Stresses and Strains on Leaders

Leaders. Who'd want to be one! Everything starts at the top.

But, it's lonely at the top. Tough, too. Of course, leaders aren't made - they're created at birth... or so "they" say.

We all know that the buck stops with the leader. The leader is ultimately responsible for everything. And when you're the leader, there's only one way to go. And that's not up.

Yet, so many of us want the job. We spend much of our working lives competing for it – positioning and pruning ourselves for the first opportunity to come our way to be the big boss.

Then one day we make it. We're part of the leadership group. Perhaps we're even the CEO, Managing Director or Managing Partner. We're a "leader". Or, as the Collins Concise Dictionary describes it, we're now "a person who rules, guides or inspires others". We're the "head".

Some think that the word "leader" is derived from the shorter "lead". Not the "show the way" verb, but the heavy toxic bluish-white metallic element that is highly malleable. The noun. Lead. That way they find it easier to understand why they suddenly feel leaden, after they've been appointed the leader.

It also explains why so many bosses see a lead shield as an important office accoutrement – to shield them from office politics, complaining employees, large creditors, unnerved clients and public speaking appointments.

Of course, we all know that leadership is nothing like that at all in the 2000's. We have triple bottom lines, top-down/bottom-up strategic planning and process re-engineering to help us. We have the internet, highly sophisticated networked systems, zero-based budgeting, reputation management, TQM, client relationship management and broad-based taxation systems to make life "easier". Then there are personal professional development programs, sometimes called training, and a host of other things we need to be on top of or heavily involved in ... to say nothing of having to ensure the client or customer is understood, with expectations met or exceeded.

And we also have quality management. So, leaders have all of these tools at their disposal, ready to be used, in one way or another, to inspire everyone in the organisation to greater success.

In short, today's leaders have an abundance of reasons – some might say excuses – why they cannot, and even should not, be the pinnacle, the motivating force and the example-setter for the next great thing the organisation has going.

Today's leader is mostly a very busy person, with a mind full of conflicting work priorities ... to say nothing of the personal demands placed on us outside work, in the fast-paced 2000's.

The very thought of adding another, somewhat idealistically-driven, office responsibility to the leader's already high, but perilously tottering, stack of duties is generally an unwelcome one.

Help from Emerging Leaders

Why does everything have to start at the top? Aren't there plenty of other people in our organisations who are capable, educated, intelligent, ambitious, success-oriented ... for both themselves and the organisation? Aren't tomorrow's leaders there somewhere in the organisation, just busting to be seen, to demonstrate their ability and therefore their credentials to lead?

If there are these people presently within our organisations, why don't they spring to the fore, show real leadership ... and take the running and responsibility for new initiatives within the organisation? What's stopping them? The fact that they are not the CEO, that's what.

It's all too often career limiting to be seen to be the maverick, the show pony, the egomaniacal "loose cannon" - the self-centred go-ahead type who seems to have no regard for consensus, or the priorities and the sensibilities of others. In any event, it's even more definitely career limiting, in fact career stopping, if such an attention-seeker gets it wrong. The risks are high.

For those who really do aspire, and legitimately so, to be members of the leadership group one day, the challenge is more about showing potential leadership capability, than it is about being seen currently as the organisation's visionary, who inspires all others in the organisation to follow them. It's not about being the de facto CEO.

This is not easy to achieve, because every person who is not CEO, nor in the leadership team, has a full-time job to do carrying out their own responsibilities to the very best of their ability. That is generally challenging enough, without trying to be a champion for a cause that the leadership group might, or might not, endorse.

In addition, shareholders, no matter how many, drive boards. Boards drive CEOs or managing partners. CEOs or managing partners drive the executive or top team. Get out of sync with that and a lot of people are going to start asking questions – either directly or indirectly. Bucking the boss, or being seen to be running a show of your own, is no certain way to the top.

So, what about delegation? Cannot a CEO hand over responsibility to someone else for implementing a major new idea, philosophy, policy or initiative? Can't the leadership team just appoint a responsible person to carry out its wishes, and, with the overt support and encouragement of that top management, have the person succeed? What's there that's likely to impede such an approach?

Well, nothing really. Provided that the normal rules of delegation are followed. The person given responsibility for the program needs, as a minimum:

- a desire to be appointed to the challenge;
- a clear brief, with objectives and/or targets;
- all the relevant skills ... or a suitable training program to remedy any skills deficiency;
- appropriate and timely supervision;
- authority commensurate with the task;
- the time to perform what's required;
- a sense of what priority the task has, both within the organisation, and vis-à-vis their own other responsibilities; and
- the public and private support of the person's supervisor, at least insofar as the task is concerned.

However, some tasks cannot be delegated. The assessment of what can and cannot be delegated is mostly made by intuitive judgement, where the first and most important criterion is magnitude. The question that needs to be answered is what magnitude will the effect of the program or task to be potentially delegated have on the organisation. For instance, strategic planning is seen by most as a role the CEO or managing partner cannot delegate. Parts of strategic planning might be, such as research. But delegating the determination of the future of the organisation as a whole to others is unimaginable to all but the most courageous. Consult? Yes. Involve others? Yes. Encourage all employees to make a contribution ... and to own the resulting strategy. Yes. But delegate the task of coming up with the organisation's vision and mission, aims and objectives, values, key strategies and the like? Unlikely.

Chief communicator for the organisation is another function most leaders would retain zealously for themselves. Chief brand establisher, and possibly head lead generator for the organisation are other roles leaders are inclined to retain for themselves. Main builder of the leadership team is another.

What other non-statutory functions must a leader personally embrace? Ultimate financial responsibility? Of course. What else?

Leaders should probably only personally be responsible for those things that, by themselves or in combination with others, are of such magnitude that the CEO or managing partner cannot delegate to others, because, well, they are so important.

Where does all of this leave us? To summarise, should leaders be helping groom future leaders within their organisations? Absolutely. Should they be assisting them to prepare themselves? Yes.

Those who wait for, or expect, tomorrow's leaders to do the running today are abdicating their responsibilities, and should probably abdicate their positions as well. They should consider handing over to tomorrow's leaders today.

Inadvertent Undermining by Leaders

Have you ever in your career seen a CEO or other senior person undermine what the organisation as a whole has set out to do?

Often this is accidental, through no malice or forethought. It's just that we all agreed that we'd follow a certain procedure or, say, a set of values, and then, at the first opportunity, the CEO or some other senior person does the opposite.

You know the kind of thing. The organisation adopts a set of well-argued values, only to see someone senior behave in a way that is in conflict with those new values. We say we are going to treat all our people with respect – mutual respect is the value. Then you hear criticism, by those at the top, of individuals who are unable to defend themselves, because they are unaware that they are being criticised.

Or the organisation has some office procedure that is soon not used by anyone, as it becomes apparent that the CEO shortcuts the procedure, or uses a different one.

Why, when that happens, do the procedures not survive anyway, in spite of the leader's disrespect for them? After all, if they are such good procedures, wouldn't everyone else other than the leader continue to use them, just because the procedures are good and deserve to be followed?

Well, perhaps. But most of us have probably seen the steady, if not sudden, erosion of respect for any practice, procedure or value that leaders within the organisation don't adopt themselves in their own behaviour.

It's arguably valid to say that leaders who are respected are emulated, and those who do not enjoy respect of employees are also copied, in that those leaders' failure to adhere to established and agreed behaviours forces individuals and small groups to devise and adopt their own behaviours. Expressed another way, these leaders appear to be saying, "If you want to be promoted to a position of leadership in this organisation like I have, you'd better start behaving like I do." That way of behaviour is generally predictably unpredictable.

Leaders can inadvertently undermine quality management programs quite easily, in any number of ways. Paying only lip-service to the program is one. Agreeing to the program's introduction, and then not abiding by what is needed of top management is another – either by simply not performing the tasks required of top management, or by demonstrating behaviour that is inconsistent with an organisation that has a quality program.

In some ways, Uncle Victor might have been quite a good example in this regard, had his utility had a quality management program. He was a convert to the need to record all important procedures, and keep revising them to seek improvement. He was a stickler for setting an example. Where he fell down, though, is at the very heart of a quality management program – understanding the needs of customers. He was not a communicator, in any meaningful sense, internally or externally. He just "did his job".

Communication, Freedom, the Common Touch and Responsibilities

Australian politics is littered with stories of leaders who didn't have, or lost, the so-called common touch. That is, they failed to be able, or to continue to be able, to relate to the person in the street. Strangely, the closer Australia came to the year 2000, and the more the lessons in this regard became apparent, the greater the number of politicians in leadership positions seemed to drift toward a certain arrogance.

In his book, "Menzies' Child", author Gerard Henderson wrote of 1941 war-time Australian Prime Minister, Robert Menzies', that his "perceived weaknesses were particularly damaging for a leader who needed to create, then embrace, a consensus."

Henderson went on: “The problem was that, to all too many, Menzies was perceived as aloof, arrogant and insensitive. And the perception was close to reality. Few disputed his intelligence and his cleverness with words. However such attributes were not enough to hold together his party, let alone the country. So Menzies went down.” He resigned as Prime Minister on 28 August 1941, ending a two-year term.

All was not lost for Menzies, though. He was re-elected leader of his party just over two years later, and then, in December 1949, the party he had formed nearly five years earlier, the Liberal Party of Australia, won the federal election. It stayed in office, with its Coalition partner, until December 1972. Menzies resigned from his record-setting term as Australian Prime Minister in January 1966.

Between his retirement in 1966 and his death on 15 May 1978, Menzies wrote in his memoirs, “Afternoon Light”, that he acknowledged his early 1940’s aloofness from his supporters in Parliament, that he had been “lacking in human relations” and was “yet to acquire the common touch”, something Menzies must have corrected before establishing the virtually-impossible-to-beat record term of office as Prime Minister.

If Menzies was, early on, guilty of aloofness and arrogance, of not taking his people with him, he is hardly alone. Other Prime Ministers of Australia, state Premiers and local government mayors have been accused of the very same, and have been thrown out of office by an unforgiving electorate.

Others, of course, are known for their great ability to take us with them in their various meritorious pursuits. In his autobiography, “Long Walk to Freedom”, Nobel Peace Prize joint winner and freedom fighter, Nelson Mandela, wrote, “I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended.”

No doubt Uncle Vic thought he was doing a great job of managing quality. The story shows the striking difference between doing and managing.

Leaders delegate what they can and do what they can’t delegate. Of all the things quality is, Uncle Vic chose to do that which could and should have been delegated by any leader. In so doing, he was not, in fact, managing. In reality, he was preventing those who most needed his quality procedures from having any ownership of them. In doing so, he destroyed all value in his creation.

Leaders who manage well delegate, teach, help, support, praise, reward, and – above all – communicate.”

We all have the freedom to choose whether quality management is for us. Mr Mandela says that, with freedom come responsibilities. For leaders, with managing quality come responsibilities.