GOOD 'LEADERSHIP' AND GOOD 'FOLLOWERSHIP'

'Leadership' is a big issue in our contemporary world. In politicians we lament the lack of principle and/or the ability to implement policy. Populist demagogues attract worrying numbers of followers. The big corporates generally have a reputation for ruthless treatment of staff and arrogant top executives. The not-for-profit sector pretends to be value-driven but, having become big business, attracts its share of ego-driven, authoritarian-minded managers. Networks, coalitions and people movements are often undermined by interpersonal rivalries. In many places where we need and would expect principled and inspiring leadership, we see people whose outstanding qualities seem to be acquiring power, self-promotion and gaming or faking values and results. They fail to lead or are bad leaders.

Most of us experience the 'quality' of leadership in our work place. The diagnosis is not good. Gallup polls around the world show that only some 13% of people feel passionate in and about their jobs. Some 63% are not engaged: they are not happy and inspired and have mentally checked out but are not ready to quit. And some 24% are deeply unhappy with their job and work environment. Money is not necessarily a primary reason. Major demotivating factors are lack of recognition, disempowering overregulation and micro-management, unhelpful and abusive behaviours of supervisors and bosses, and a disregard in practice for the professed values of the organisation. The result is a massive loss of intrinsic motivation, which is the fountain of active responsibility, productivity and creativity. If our accounting systems were less primitive and would pick up this massive wastage of 'productivity' and 'value', we would have addressed it long ago.

What does this say about the effectiveness and the 'value-for-money' or 'return on investment' of the huge leadership and management consultancy industries, the many human resource professionals and the smaller but growing coaching profession?

Many of us, including people in formally senior positions, remain confused about what 'leadership' – and followership' is really about. In this post, I want to reiterate some of the key insights about 'leadership'. In a later post I will explore some of the challenges for the leadership of development organisations in the 21s century.

1. Leadership is a human relation, not a position.

There is no leadership without followership. Leadership is a relationship between different actors, with usually one leading others who accept to follow. Leadership is in the eye of the beholder. You can call yourself a great leader, but that remains a self-promoting myth if you are not recognised and respected for your leadership by others.

2. Leadership is about providing people a purpose.

Leadership is first and foremost about providing people a purpose that inspires and motivates, and mobilises them into a commitment towards something that is greater than their narrow

self-interest. Decision-making is often an important part of leadership, but less central than 'purpose'. 'Why' is more fundamental than 'what'.

3. Leadership can rely on hard power and/or soft power.

Getting others to follow you is a form of power. Followership can be obtained by hard power: the use of rewards and threats. But such transactional relationship has high ongoing costs: the followers are not intrinsically motivated, and sticks and carrots need to be dispensed constantly. Leadership based heavily on hard power ends up breeding mistrust and apathy and in the end defiance.

Soft power relies on persuading but also attracting others to want what you want. The notion of 'attraction' evokes that of the 'charismatic' leader. Being an effective communicator is a key component of being perceived as charismatic. Yet we also know from human history the risks and disappointments with overly charismatic leaders. 'Attraction', and with it commitment and loyalty, can also derive from respect for someone being perceived as a real role model, who shows respect and is a great enabler for others. Soft power alone however is not sufficient in all situations.

4. Leadership is intrinsically amoral.

The exercise of effective leadership says nothing about the ethical quality of the purpose for which people are mobilised. Hitler, Slobodan Milosevic and many others in human history were great leaders: they successfully mobilised millions of people for years on end even if achieving the 'purpose' inevitably involved large scale violence, destruction and domination. In retrospect we call it 'mis-leading'. Effective leaders are not automatically ethical leaders. Ethical or principled leadership is a deliberate choice.

5. Leadership is contextual.

Someone can be providing great leadership in one situation but not in another. When a fire breaks out in the cinema hall, the 'leadership' that results in an orderly evacuation may come from the popcorn seller and not from the governor who came to see the film. Winston Churchill was a great war-time leader but lost the general election in 1945.

Leadership can be 'distributed', it can be exercised by anyone, whatever their position within a formal hierarchy. It is not intrinsically linked to those at the top. The most appreciated great people at the top are those that are 'leader-breeders' – they encourage others to develop and use their leadership skills for the collective benefit.

6. Leadership is imperfect.

No single person is best placed and most insightful to set the course and take decisions all the time and on everything. Mature individuals acknowledge their limitations and deliberately invite the perspectives, ideas and proposals from others. Mature leaders surround themselves with a capable team that has complementary experience and skills and that is not only allowed but encouraged to bring different views. The aim is to improve the idea by argument, to have the best possible decision under the circumstances, not the senior person getting what s/he wants. Excessive alignment kill diversity and with it creativity and innovation.

7. Leadership and management skills are needed both.

Management mostly focuses on the what and the how, leadership on the why. Management focuses more on output, leadership more on motivation. Achieving desirable outcomes and

impacts requires both. People will not sustain their mobilisation around a compelling vision towards a shared purpose if they don't see progress. While a management that only focuses on outputs or on rule-compliance will destroy all intrinsic motivation and commitment. It must then largely rely on sanctions and rewards which does not bring out the best in people.

8. Leadership skills can be developed.

Some people have a greater natural predisposition to exercise leadership, but anyone can improve their leadership skills. There is a very profitable leadership industry for the private sector that has increasing uptake in the public sector. The not-for-profit sector seems keener on supplying 'leadership training' than on applying it to itself.

A 'leadership' course can provide you some frameworks with which to think about what 'leadership' means and an assessment of where you (and your bosses) are at now. But a stand-alone course will not have much impact on who you are and how you behave. Some participants may even use the certificate of attendance as 'evidence' that they now have leadership qualities. Real leadership development comes from ongoing intentional practice ('10.000 hours'!) and personal growth, best guided by mentoring or coaching and regularly tested through honest feedback, for years on end. No person will become a 'rounded' or well-balanced leader, if s/he is not prepared to work hard on sometimes difficult and uncomfortable personal development.

9. Leadership styles require contextual intelligence.

Between the aggressive, dominant, authoritarian alpha male (or female), and the 'servant leader' who sees her or his role largely as an enabler of the best qualities of others, there is a range of possible leadership styles. Most of us have one or two preferred styles, the ones that come most 'natural' to us. Leadership development however requires becoming more comfortable also with other styles, and developing the contextual intelligence to know which style is most appropriate for any given situation. Accomplished individuals may use several different styles within the course of one day, depending on the issue at hand and the people they are dealing with. This requires a strong 'overall intelligence' (analytical, emotional, cultural....) and a high level of self-awareness and self-management.

10. Leadership styles can be constrained by social expectations.

Often the behaviour of someone who has or wants to portray him or herself as a leader is shaped by social norms. People in senior positions in the security forces, top politicians, top business executives etc. are typically expected to be very confident and decisive. People look to them for the answers and the decisions. Extrovert behaviour and being talkative are typically seen as qualities of leadership - until Susan Cain showed us the power of more introverted and listening styles. Being 'tough' is more associated with 'leadership' than being 'compassionate'.

The 'strong' or 'big man' is certainly the predominant image of a 'leader' throughout most of Western history and remains so in many other societies. The 'leader' taking personal responsibility for (public) 'failure', quickly offering his resignation and in the past even committing ritual suicide, seems on the other hand a fairly unique Japanese feature.

Other people look for spiritual 'leaders', 'guides', gurus, and have different expectations about what is the appropriate behaviour for the role. This too can vary, from an apocalypse-promising 16th century Anabaptist prophet, to a licentious and libidinous guru who accumulates the wealth and sexual pleasures of his disciples, to the compassionate wisdom

and modestly of a Dalai Lama. It is said that followers get the leader they deserve – but also the leader they create.

Given that 'leadership' is in the eye of the beholder, it is not always easy to display styles that do not correspond to the social expectations in a particular milieu. 'Leader-breeders' for example excel in asking the right question instead of always pretending to have the right answer. Yet it may not be advisable to pursue a style that goes very much against the prevailing expectations, before you have been able to build strong relationships and gain some respect.

In contemporary Western societies the tolerance for the 'big man' style, also when played by a woman, is growing thin. We want more enabling environments, less arrogance and more accountability. We feel stronger loyalty to those who are 'fair' than those who are 'tough'. We appreciate people that believe in 'power with' rather than 'power over'. We accept criticism but want it to be constructive so we can learn and grow. We can see through people who are faking it, and reserve our respect for those whom we sense to be 'authentic'. We need more team coaches and less chiefs.

As Barbara Kellerman has pointed out, responsible followership can be a powerful force to prevent and control the aberrations of ego-driven leaders and in support of good leadership. The overwhelming majority of people are 'followers' most of the time, and most of those in managerial and supervisory positions also have others 'above them' whom they report to. Why are we not offering training, self- and group development courses about 'responsible followership'? If the supply of good leadership seems short, perhaps the 63% of disengaged employees can leverage their numbers into a stronger demand?

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