

LEADERSHIP FOR GOODNESS SAKE

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The song says that what the world needs now is love, and that's the only thing that there's just too little of. Who am I to argue with that? But after love, what the world and our organizations need right now is some decent leadership.

I contend that there are four ingredients to great and successful leadership: Being Good, Thinking Well, Acting Committedly and Managing Skillfully. We might call these the Four Pillars of Leadership.

For some senior and commercial managers who are working hard to make stuff, provide services and sell things at a profit, the requirement to Be Good might sound a little over-the-top and grandiose. I concur that grandiosity is not much help to the everyday exercise of leadership – great as he was, it is not necessary for us all to go to jail for twenty-eight years and channel Nelson Mandela to be effective leaders. I do strive to dispel too much grandness from my own writing, so I will do my best to be plain speaking while exploring this first Pillar.

I have just returned from my summer holidays at the glorious beaches, forests and farmland of the Otways in Victoria. Nature always invites me back to the fundamental goodness of life. Of course, there are plenty of dangers, traumas and tragedies in life, and because of our human freedom there is also the potential for evil. We even attack nature. But as I listen to the graceful birdsong, watch the mountain streams bubbling across the rocks and feel the rays of that continuously burning gaseous ball in the sky which is the source of all our energy, heat and light, I am delighted again in the goodness of life itself.

Artists attempt to capture it through the expression of beauty. There is a goodness in human life too. When you observe a new born baby it is hard to see anything other than pure goodness. We were all new born babies once. I am tempted to say that it is in our nature to be good, but that is going too far. It is very natural for us to be good, and life works well for us when we are good, but we can just as naturally bring evil, conflict, greed and destruction into the world. Some folks see goodness as evidence for a supernatural Being – the word God is

linked to the word Good. Personally, I now see goodness as a wonderful mystery, but still belonging to the mundane world.

It seems to me that great and successful leadership is sourced in this goodness, and inspires and harnesses this goodness in others. Leadership itself is a force for good – or it is not leadership. (see my thoughts on Adolf Hitler in “Leadership On Purpose” and my article “Leadership and the Better Person”) In our organizations, we give all sorts of names to this quest such as “moral authority” or “purpose and meaning” or “service to others” or “values and virtues”, or “ethical behaviour”. I use understatement and talk about “change for the better” and “beneficial outcomes”. Others describe it as a “Hero’s Journey” at the heart of leadership. On my professional programs I have been moved by the cautious willingness of hard-nosed senior managers to name it as “love”. Perhaps I should not be so surprised – how common is it these days to hear sports’ leaders publicly declaring their love for their team members?

It does seem clear that for leadership to be a force for good, it does need to be about contributing to others and helping others to cooperate, and not a mere expression of our too-small egos. Our ego is largely an immortality and vanity project cooked up to deny our impermanence and temporary residence of this planet, and to separate us from the pack by whispering false claims that we are more special than others. If our attributes and successes will not sustain our belief in specialness, then we will rely ingeniously on our inadequacies and tragedies as proof of our uniqueness. A strange aspect of the immortality and vanity project called ego, is that we humans can be very shy project managers and reluctant to admit even to ourselves how much energy we devote to the mission. I know that I am. Ego is not necessarily bad, but it is inherently unrealistic and vulnerable, and it will undermine good leadership.

In his new book “The Meaning Revolution”, Fred Kofman makes a strong argument for the value of missionary leadership and missionary businesses. Fred was formerly an economics and leadership academic at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and currently is VP for Executive Education at LinkedIn. I once attended a seminar which he conducted for executives at AXA when I was doing development work there for Melbourne Business School, and I found him an outstanding teacher. He describes how leaders and companies struggle with

performance incentives. Individual incentives can work against collaboration, while collective incentives can undermine individual effort. He argues that when leaders and companies also provide a noble mission and compelling meaning for work they can transcend this divide. I personally found Fred Kofman's book very inspiring, but he also regularly indulges in grandiose notions of leadership, and he skirts around many of the dangers and complications of his recommendations. He is a big fan of Sheryl Sandberg who he has coached, but he does not address the potential for contradictions between a company's mission and its business model which is demonstrated in the data sharing, privacy and fake news scandals currently facing Facebook. Also, Fred does not adequately address the downside of meaningfulness and leadership missions, namely, our human tendency to become very attached to meanings, to become too significant, to view stories as the rigid truth, to identify with them too much, and to be very defensive or aggressive in asserting their superiority or purity to others.

I have called this pillar Being Good because goodness still seems to have a freshness about it to me. The Classical thinkers used to refer to it as a virtuous life. I can live with that as long as it is virtue without too much moralizing and too many absolutes. It does seem to me that like liberty, the price of goodness in our leadership is eternal vigilance. It is not practical for most of us to cuddle babies all day or escape to the bush to be in touch with it. I recommend a regular leadership practice of reflection and meditation to keep it close. And inspiration is only part of the story. Leadership is largely perspiration argues Ron Heifetz, so let's briefly examine my other three pillars.

Leaders need to Think Well. I am talking about high quality thinking here. Most of us think a lot and have heaps of thoughts, but if we are honest with ourselves, much of that thinking is low-grade, repetitive or junk status. I know that sounds insulting, but I am still waiting for volunteers who will let me wire up their brains so we can broadcast their stream of thoughts to the public. There are a lot of high quality ideas and lessons around about strategy, change, culture, collaboration, finance, marketing, creativity, innovation and the like. Leaders do not need to be experts in all of this, but we do need to keep learning about it.

The other important aspect of thinking well for leaders is to have personal insight. I am not sure how many original ideas I have had in my life, but I have done the

hard work of thinking in order to have my own insights. The great thing about insight is it is actionable and can lead to change and innovation. Leaders often provide insight so others can act. Many of my own leadership insights are directly inspired from the ideas of great practitioners, researchers and scholars. Other times, I will wrestle for a long period with a bundle of my experiences and thoughts until I can encapsulate a clear insight. I always find it satisfying when I can articulate it, but I invariably discover that others have thought it long before me and expressed it in a much more sophisticated way. This can be exciting for me too, because it means I have been exploring for myself the same thinking trail that the originals have traversed or opened up.

Acting Committedly is another of my pillars for great and successful leadership. The action dimension of leadership seems pretty obvious, although companies regularly include a “bias for action” in their core values which seems to suggest that they see a need for a reminder. I find that commitment is not so well understood. I think of commitment as a two-stage process. The first stage is taking ourselves and others up to the water as often and in as many ways as is necessary until an intention is formed and a choice is made to drink the water. I view my teaching as both a process of assisting people to have insights, and as one long process of taking participants to the water and inviting them to make choices and to commit to quenching their thirst. The second stage of commitment is the constant reinforcement of our initial intention and choices in order to sustain our actions in the face of inevitable set-backs and disappointments.

Finally, leaders need to Manage Skillfully. Twenty years ago, a Harvard Business School Professor explained to me that Leadership was largely scorned at HBS, and Negotiation studies had been made a compulsory subject on the MBA because it was a “metaphor” for leadership. Now, most subjects at HBS are titled Leadership – even lofty institutions can eventually catch the breeze and adjust their marketing strategy. But going beyond the branding façade, we cannot forget that management skills are essential for successful leadership. Senior managers are unlikely to be able to inspire and empathize their way to sustained success. Budgets need to be prepared, deals negotiated, teams built, people coached, logistics sorted, projects delivered, technology integrated, and the like. These are skills – organizations need all of them, and credible leaders need some of them.

