

# LEADERSHIP CREAM RISES TO THE TOP (If We Let It)

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The Cream rises to the top – that is one of the most important things that I have learnt over the past ten years conducting senior leadership development with thousands of managers and hundreds of different organisations.

I don't mean that the best people always rise to the top in organisations. Sadly, that is definitely not the case. I mean that if some of the blockages and suppression orders can be removed, and enough encouragement and insight can be provided, people's natural, intrinsic leadership ability and passion will rise to the top just like cream will in a container of milk. Put another way, most of us are capable of exercising far more leadership than we or our environment will allow ourselves to demonstrate.

My friend and colleague Amanda Sinclair has written eloquently of her wish to foster a kind of leadership which is not just effective but also is liberating for others (see her book "Leadership for the Disillusioned"). I concur with her entirely on this. I go one step further. I believe that it is the job of good leaders and smart leadership development to help liberate leadership itself which often can be constrained and masked, and to allow the leadership cream to rise naturally to the top.

This may seem a bit optimistic to some of you who feel that currently you are swimming in a sea of skinny milk where there isn't much cream available to tackle your leadership challenges. I do not want to discount how challenging it can be to liberate the leadership cream – as I often tell participant managers you may need to crawl through the latrines a little at first if you wish to achieve clarity and confidence and certainty about your leadership. And I do not advocate cheap answers or easy formulas for exercising leadership. But a good place to start may be to let go of the need to control, the judging and

evaluating, and the protection of self and authority, which are important to management as well as to basic human survivalist skills, but which can be anathema to leadership.

At the start of many of my own senior leadership programs I will ask participant managers whether they believe that leadership can be taught. My intention in asking the question is not to give even more air time to the rather arid debate over whether leaders are born or nurtured. Although some people may have more natural skill and inclination when it comes to leadership, it is not particularly relevant since most senior managers and lots of others are called upon to exercise leadership whether they do or don't fall into this hallowed category. However I do consider that there is something special about leadership which means that it cannot be taught, at least not in the way that we teach accounting or marketing or any other technical management topic. This specialness goes to the issue of responsibility. I am very confident, though, that it can be learnt and developed and embraced.

Over the past ten years I have been working with others to articulate the thinking and refine a method which will allow a manager's intrinsic, natural leadership ability and passion to rise to the top just like cream does in a container of milk. The nickname I give my approach is "The LID with the LOT". The LOT refers to the working title of the forthcoming publication of my collected articles called "Leadership On Top – How Managers and Others Become Leaders". These articles spell out everything that I have learnt about leadership from working with thousands of senior managers over the past decade – my thinking on effective leadership is not just informed by theory but it is shaped by the empirical evidence from this learning laboratory. The LID refers to our exciting and innovative learning method which I call Leadership Insight Dialogue and which I have described in detail in my previous article "The Seven Elements of Leadership Insight Dialogue".

Now I have developed the latest version of my Senior Leadership Development which I am calling "The Essential Leader Program" (ELP) and which I and others will be conducting inside corporations, organisations and communities in various formats. Why Essential Leader? It is Essential because the program will allow senior managers to connect to the essence of their own intrinsic leadership ability and passion. It is Essential because the program content will

examine what is critical to be effective and fulfilled as a leader. It focuses on the core work of leadership in modern organisations – what I call the 3Cs of leadership work – Change, Collaboration and Creativity. And it is Essential because the program will address the leadership success which is most wanted and needed right now by businesses, organisations and our communities – the type of leadership which helps us to achieve our purposes, execute our strategies and deliver on our performance goals.

Finally, it is not just leadership which is Essential but it is also the need to develop our leadership. If senior managers are not still growing as leaders, they will be shrinking as leaders! The natural dynamic of entropy will ensure that. The President of Pixar Animation, Ed Catmull, has been one of the driving forces behind Pixar's originality and success along with Steve Jobs and George Lucas. In telling the story of that sustained innovation in his recent book "Creativity, Inc", Catmull argues that Pixar's identity was cemented when they committed to being a company that would never settle, and they elevated a core question to a modus operandi, "What are we currently blind to that is holding us back or can undo us?"

That is the other great insight which I have had from working with so many managers and organisations on their leadership – entropic processes in individuals and collectives are everywhere. And so it is that it takes hope and risk and work – and lots of love – to liberate leadership.