

LEADERSHIP THAT TRANSFORMS GROUPS AND ORGANISATIONS

By Richard Searle

A very special moment happens on our senior leadership program when it is all over and the bus has arrived to take people to the airport, but the managers continue to linger and engage in their long and reluctant goodbyes to each and every other person on the program. As we stand there it reminds us of an earlier inspiring event when the group expressed their appreciation and made their acknowledgements to each other.

Witnessing the shift that occurs in a group from the start to the end of a program is one of the most amazing and humbling aspects of our work with senior managers. In one sense what happens is quite simple and straight forward – this diverse group of managers gets in touch with each other, connects strongly and starts to work together really well and very creatively. But in another sense it is a truly miraculous transformation to observe and it is very powerful. Many managers will report that they have not experienced such a level of collaboration before. It is not achieved by chance, or time, or techniques, or personalities or camaraderie – it is accomplished through leadership. A little bit of that leadership is ours, but by and large it is theirs.

We intend from the outset of our work with the group to cause this shift. Our goal is to demonstrate to the senior managers how such a transformation can be achieved through the effective exercise of leadership, and to have them experience directly how much they can accomplish and how fulfilling it is for them to participate in such a collective change. We then encourage them to go back to their own management teams and organisations and make it happen there. This is critical for them too because this is how they will sustain their own change.

We believe that leadership occurs in relationships. Those relationships might be one person to another person, or a group or organization, or involve numerous stakeholders or the public. Effective leadership transforms the

“relational space”, or group and organizational dynamics in these entities, in order to bring about significant individual and collective change.

In my article “Leadership That Transforms Part 1”, I describe how transformations often begin as a shift in how individuals and collectives experience themselves, others and the world. This kind of transformation opens up all sorts of new possibilities and opportunities and avenues of action which were not previously available, and through committed effort it can lead to big changes for the better.

On our senior leadership program we describe the purpose of the course as “Together to learn some new and valuable things about leadership that will make a significant difference to our work and lives”. We see this as both a pragmatic and a transformational goal, but that “together” regularly throws people. For some it is “well obviously we are all sitting together in this room”. For others it is more like “why do we have to learn it together?” or “do we all have to learn the same thing?” In my own mind the “Together” is a tautology which we state explicitly because its truth is regularly hidden from view.

I describe the relationship between individuals and groups, or leaders and groups, as both symbiotic (interdependent) and dialectic (bouncing off each other). Both the individual and the group are shaping each other, and the nature and quality of these relationships constrain or licence the work of leadership and change. Importantly the nature of the relating often remains in the background and invisible. As individuals we can be blind to it – I know that I often am. Interestingly though, when you walk into a group or organization for the first time you can often “smell” it within minutes. It is hard for leaders to influence something that they are not attending to and cannot see. I am calling it the “relational space”. Others such as Robert Bales and Otto Scharmer refer to it as a “field”. A more common term is “group and organizational dynamics”, but this terminology sometimes can seem too transactional and mechanistic for what is fundamentally relational. I have described some of these typical and invisible dynamics in an earlier article titled “The Secret Life of Organisations”.

In my article “Could It Be As Simple As Listening”, I have also described the nature of group relating as a Dialogue, a term which I use in the strict sense of

speaking and listening, but also in a broader sense of how groups are relating, communicating, problem solving and creating together. Drawing on the work of Bill Isaacs and Otto Scharmer at Massachusetts Institute of Technology I argue that it takes many acts of leadership to shift group dialogue from its typical norm-based or positional forms to its more reflective and generative forms. Norm-based Dialogue is designed to keep things civilised, avoid conflict and entrench power relationships. Positional Dialogue is more honest but heated because real issues, power groupings, tension and conflicts see the light of day. Reflective Dialogue is mindful, respectful and there is real listening and a willingness to address differences and tough issues which were too divisive previously. Generative Dialogue is characterised by flow, generous listening, creativity, high performance and sometimes fun. Later I describe some of the leadership moves or acts which I believe can shift a group through dialogue.

It is very hard to do other important leadership work – mobilizing folks to achieve a common purpose, or to deal with adaptive challenges, to make tough choices or be creative about the future – without first bringing about a shift in the relational space of a group. Many leadership and change initiatives flounder because leaders have not attended at the outset to the quality of relating or dialogue within the group or organization. And of course this is a major component of the overall culture of an organization.

I remember hearing David Marsing, a senior manager with Intel, describing how as a young manager he went about setting up the first Pentium chip factory for Intel. This multi-billion dollar manufacturing site broke all sorts of performance records for Intel at the time. Marsing described his management goal not in terms of outputs, but as a commitment to build an “Environment of Appreciation”. Sounding like many modern football coaches he argued that superior performance is not achieved by leaders becoming obsessive about results but rather by leaders focusing their attention and energy on cultivating the means. An environment of appreciation and acknowledgement is very empowering and it can produce remarkable performance and outcomes. But it is a universe away from papering over problems – ironically, this environment allows people to be far more open about weaknesses and vulnerabilities and far more direct in giving and receiving feedback.

Many groups and organizations do not operate as an environment of appreciation and acknowledgement. Lots of things get in the way of this – norms, rules, positions, agendas, conflicts, egos, fears and cynicism. Perhaps the most important obstacle though, could be described as “ judgementalism” (an invented word not to be found in the dictionary) – the excessive, habitual and self-centred judging of others and ourselves. I am being merely descriptive and not judgemental when I say this. Judging is an important dimension of our cognitive ability – judgementalism is a product of identity and ego. Judgementalism is all about protecting and projecting our identity and ego, and forcing our self-centred perspective and agenda on to others and the group. It can take many different forms – sitting there quietly with a head full of expectations of others and our self can be the human version of a gravitational black hole! It is always fascinating and a little bit shocking on our programs when participants have the courage to share some of the judgements they have had of each other and of us!

We have observed from our work with many senior management groups that the following are some of the leadership moves which will assist a group to confront and move beyond all the judgementalism, positioning and tension: create an attractive vision or possibility for the future; introduce a burning platform; name some of the elephants; break some of the norms and rules; permit and constructively manage the conflict and anxiety; listen more deeply and encourage others to emulate; suspend judgement and invite others to join you; let go of attachments to positions while still advocating them passionately; let go of ego; encourage playfulness; be appreciative of and acknowledge others. Obviously you do not need to have the title Leader or Boss to engage in these leadership moves and they are all designed to win over others and shift a whole group.

It is popular in many companies and organizations for senior management to focus on strategies, systems, structures and technologies in order to achieve major change and improvements. These are all very important and this leadership approach can work. The kind of change which I have been describing here is more organic and it can also be more creative. Jon Kabat Zinn has a very ugly but useful word to describe the process – he calls it orthogonal. Orthogonal is rotating at a ninety degree angle while still anchored

to the original frame. It is like moving at right angles to a two dimensional square to form a cube, which not only gives you a new perspective on the square but provides a whole lot more space to move in. Individual and group transformations are like that. And these individuals and groups can themselves become orthogonal within their own organizations, where their new perspectives, freedom of movement, creativity, relatedness and success may influence others to shift and join them. This is far more likely when it is an intentional, strategic act of leadership.

Searle, Richard *Leadership On Top: How Managers and Others Become Leaders* 2016, 112-117