

How leaders can achieve positive change

Leaders attempting positive change can run into conflicts with embedded perceptions of their own sense of self. Changing such perceptions may be a challenging process.

When Prime Minister, Tony Blair said that it's not the role of business to solve social problems. Business should just get on with the business of making money and leave social issues to others. How things have changed.

Today, business is not popular. Rather than being seen as the engine of the prosperity we all seek, business has allowed its image to become transformed into that of the evildoer responsible for many of our social ills. They are failing to play their part in addressing the complex issues social issues that we face. Or so the narrative goes.

What has changed?

The 21st century culture in which business operates is evolving into something that is fundamentally different from that which Tony Blair expressed in the dying days of the 20th century. Then business could afford to be amoral, follow the rules and get on with the business of making money. No longer. Today, businesses, and their leaders, have no choice but to become deeply embroiled in cultural, social and moral issues that affect our society – and to shoulder directly some of the responsibility for addressing these issues. This requires the development of a different kind of leadership – one that is more deeply embedded in contemporary mores. What will it take to develop this new leadership style?

It's not so easy

For some commentators the answers may seem clear. Business leaders must change the culture of their organizations to make them more socially responsible. This is a reasonable starting point. But it is no more than a starting point. How do we get there? It seems only like

yesterday that then newly appointed Barclays CEO Anthony Jenkins announced his "transform" programme that was supposed to regain the public's trust. A year or so later, his decision to increase bonuses in the face of collapsing profits has been described as a "shameful" confirmation of all that is wrong with bankers.

What's the problem? We have to assume that individuals like Jenkins are honestly trying to achieve change. Yet he and others fall flat on their faces at the first turn. Why do competent, high level leaders with seemingly good intentions have such difficulty breaking out of the tired old ways of doing things – ways that we now find culturally unacceptable?

Shifting awareness

We use the term 'Cultural Leadership' to describe a leadership approach that puts at its centre the interdependence between organisations and the cultural context in which they seek to operate. It implies a substantial shift in awareness that requires leaders to view their role within a much larger context. Such awareness reaches beyond concerns about survival and growth to encompass the more far-reaching impacts of their decisions on the well-being of community and society.

Written down here in black and white makes it seem like a common sense, simple thing to do. This, of course, underestimates the challenges that face business leaders in getting there. Not just operational challenges (those are the easy bits), but challenges associated with something much more fundamental – the re-framing of self-identity; first of all for the top leadership team and then for the wider organization. This represents a very fundamental shift in leaders' perception of who they are and what their job is.

The psychology of change

Much has been written about the psychology of change and the role of shifts in awareness in leadership development. From the importance of double-loop learning frameworks for describing how a person interprets events and makes meaning to ways of addressing adaptive challenges to which there is no known answer, there are



many tools available to business leaders to thrive in the new environment. However, while leadership coaching has, usefully, focused a good deal on evoking change by surfacing and challenging ingrained beliefs, and by encouraging curiosity about the minds and motivations of others, very little has been done to expand the inquiry into the broader social and cultural responsibilities facing a leader. Nor do traditional techniques explicitly target the post-conventional approach that may be the essential ingredient of Cultural Leadership.

More recently we have seen an additional, complementary approach

start to emerge. Mindfulness training, perhaps more directly than any other approach, seeks to bring into awareness the frames through which we interpret experience. By bringing attention to the present moment we can learn to interrupt our habitual patterns of thinking. It encourages a shift in awareness, where thoughts, feelings and actions, rather than occupying leaders' full attention, can be observed from a detached viewpoint and can therefore be addressed more creatively. By stepping back from the automatic reactions that have become ingrained habits leaders can reframe their challenges, consider multiple viewpoints, connect with their deepest

values, and explore radically new strategies and innovations.

An INSEAD report from 2006 showed that mindfulness training led to significant shifts toward socially responsible motivations (e.g. social welfare, protection of the environment, concern for external stakeholders), and significant positive shifts in personal values (towards inner harmony, unity with nature, wisdom, a world of beauty, and being forgiving). Mindfulness appears to allow leaders to identify with a broader or more evolved sense of self. It is this broadening of perspectives of the self in relation to the world that lies at the heart of Cultural Leadership™. Other studies have shown benefits in terms of creative style thinking, improved decision-making, speed and flexibility of thinking, improved executive functioning, and increased attentional stability.

Part of a programme

Although companies such as Google have now introduced mindfulness programmes for a broad range of their staff, such training alone will not, of course, achieve the required change. Yet, it can be an important part of a comprehensive programme that examines, among other things, whether existing senior management teams are capable of achieving change as opposed to maintaining operational success under the current paradigms (usually the main reason why they have been successful); building cultural antennae into organizations' skill set; helping organizations define a broader, more motivating and more resilient sense of purpose; and others.

This article first appeared in the Guardian. Text Joe Zammit-Lucia in collaboration with Graham Lee.

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