

SUSTAINABLE SHIFTS IN LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOUR: SORTING THE FACTS FROM THE FICTION

What is leadership and management development if it isn't an impact on the behaviour of managers and leaders? But how much do we concretely know – supported by evidence – about what actually creates shifts in behaviour in our organisations? And to what degree do these shifts become the norm over time?

We convened a workshop in the Winter of 2017 to explore this further with a selection of clients from diverse organisations in diverse sectors, not least because of shared concerns over the time, effort, energy and money that goes in to activity that doesn't seem to make much difference to the day-to-day lived experience in organisations. So we decided to get together to explore and share what does.

THE WORKSHOP

The group represented the disciplines of:

- > *HR*
- > *Organisation development*
- > *Leadership development*
- > *Talent management*
- > *Performance improvement*
- > *Communications*
- > *Culture*
- > *Change*

...and the following organisations:

- > *HSBC*
- > *Investec*
- > *Arrow Global*
- > *Dentons*
- > *Expedia*
- > *Financial Times*
- > *Mondelez*
- > *Temenos*

We set out to:

- Share examples of what has worked and is working in diverse practice
- Understand better the root causes of these successes
- Share how to make sense of these predisposing factors in a more systemic way

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Given that we were looking to find, understand and amplify what works, from our real and lived experience, we used an Appreciative Inquiry process. Pairs of workshop participants interviewed each other about exceptional experiences of enabling or experiencing successful and sustained shifts in behaviour.

This was then followed with a goldfish bowl session in which groups shared and discussed what they had heard whilst observers of the conversation noted anything and everything that struck them about what they were hearing. Participants moved freely and frequently in and out of the discussing and observing roles.

The huge number of observations generated from this session were then posted up on the wall and we collectively sought patterns and meaning in what we were seeing – and allowed ourselves to be open to what it might be trying to tell us!

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Clarity of performance expectations

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Attending to the individual and the collective (tribe)

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Creating a desirable tribe or community to join through showing new behaviours

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Meet individual needs to achieve their goals

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No change without real sense of ownership for the change

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Where are you going to do it? In the everyday

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People discussing/ coaching each other

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Creating a safe space for vulnerability

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Appetite from leaders to be challenged to do things differently

MANAGEMENT SUMMARY THEMES

The data we produced felt like it fell into a number of categories and that these categories could be viewed as existing in some pairs in tension with each other. Attending to these factors in designing leadership, management and organisational development could provide significant opportunities for enhancing the impact of work on leadership behaviour – and on increasing the probability of that impact being sustained.

1

Membership

The mutuality and personal investment in a collective system and a sense of collective responsibility towards it and its legacy. The familial aspect that work can offer people and the richness of reward that people derive from a sense of belonging, social identity and being ‘on a mission’ together. Individual leaders are not being expected to act alone but are part of a wider, authorised and legitimised direction-of-travel.

2

Environment of psychological safety

Individuals need to feel safe and to feel supported in trying out different behaviour, and to believe that it is okay and desirable to make well thought out mistakes. This needs to be at all levels and to be modelled by senior leaders with an increased awareness, and disclosing, of their own sense of vulnerability and exposure (see under ‘Inclusivity and being in this together’ below).

3

Invitation

Rather than the imposition of ‘one new right way’, programmes of leadership and organisational development can be positioned as an invitation to be guided and supported in identifying and experimenting with new individual practices, in order “...to learn what works best for you”. This prototyping positioning allows individuals to think about the specific circumstances of their situation, their role responsibilities, their people and their political environment.

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Individuality

Recognising the desire of individuals to be ‘a special case’, to be distinct and unique, to not be ‘lumped in’ with the crowd. In development this is often seen as the need for work to be able to be generative by and for the individual, rather than creating a feeling of being processed through a common curriculum, often at the level of the lowest common denominator.

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Confidence in own competence

Individuals need to feel, and have their confidence built, that they are perfectly capable of meeting new expectations and that these are largely an evolution of some aspects of their existing practice. New directions, transformations, evolutions should not be made to feel like an abandoning of leaders’ sunk investment in their current sources of identity, competence and credibility but an expansion of repertoire to include new and more diverse sources.

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Necessity

The invitation described above however can also be accompanied by clarity and assertion that this *IS* the direction the organisation is taking and ‘...we mean it’. Amongst all the day-to-day noise of organisational initiatives, comms, programmes, projects etc. it is necessary to be unequivocal that ‘...whether you choose to come with us or not, we are going anyway!’

4

Space to develop individual practice

Leaders need space, time and support to develop new leadership practices in their real work, and so we should be designing in the participants' real work as the vehicle for development wherever and whenever possible. Generally it is felt that if development is not more or less immediately applicable to day-to-day work challenges then it is irrelevant.

5

Individual and discrete learning support

The more senior the participants, the more individual and private they seem to want their opportunities for self-examination and disclosure to be. As a generalisation, leaders tend to prefer the psychological safety of offline/one-to-one opportunities to discuss their individual challenges over opportunities with their peers/ in a group. These one-to-one conversations are often found with an external facilitator or coach.

6

Executive ownership

For behavioural shifts to become a new norm, the inconvenient truth is that there needs to be sustained senior executive ownership of this movement. This is distinct from 'sponsorship' of initiatives, which are then frequently delegated to others. Ownership suggests an active and visible interest, involvement, attention and concern. It needs to feel as much of a strategic imperative as any element of strategy execution.

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Performance expectations

Notwithstanding the space and time that leaders need to develop practice, there should be clear but appropriate leadership performance expectations that support the intentions of any development programme. These expectations need to have richness and depth rather than the simple expediency that is all too common to performance goals.

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Collective learning community

Whilst recognising the preference for individual and discrete learning support, it is also observed that there is a social element to leadership behaviour shifts that is best served by participants sharing insights, experiences and challenges along the way. This reinforces the sense of being part of a movement/on a mission (described above) as well as supporting development and sustainment of change.

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Inclusivity (being in this together and fallible)

Whilst strong executive ownership is necessary, it needs to be tempered with a recognition that there can be no 'us and them' in the need for behavioural shift. So 'we' the senior executives 'are as much the subjects of this programme of evolution or change as anyone' and no more likely to get it 'right' than anyone else. If and when they get it 'wrong' or fail to uphold the new standards they may seek, it shouldn't be interpreted as 'they never meant it in the first place'.