

Organisational Leadership Wins

Bill Tate

When dealing with an organisation - from inside or outside, and whether as customer, employee, investor, or supplier - there always seems to be scope for better leadership. But where should you go looking for it? Do you need to be an explorer, architect, miner, or gardener?

The knee-jerk response is to jump straight to the most obvious solution: training and coaching to develop individuals' leadership skills and potential. This conveniently bypasses the problem-diagnosis stage. It also overlooks the disconnect between what happens at the individual and the organisational levels.

If better leadership means the organisation is better led in what it does (and not just that it has better trained individual leaders) personal development is the wrong place to look. To see and understand leadership in its organisational context, you need to look at how it is currently being used, what it's needed for, and how leadership itself needs to be different. Consider some examples: (see box).

The key to leadership is often buried all too deeply

The key to leadership - the current lack of it as well as its future - is to be found in the organisation, often deeply buried. Programmes to develop leadership skills come a long way behind. Managers probably already have some of these skills anyway. The organisation may simply have a problem releasing them.

Strategically aware management developers have long been calling for more real context to be injected into programmes. Desirable though that is, their advice misses the point. To think about leadership organisationally requires a new approach (www.organisational-

THREE FACES OF 'DEVELOPMENT'

- BBC leaders tell managers on a leadership development programme, 'You are the BBC. If it needs changing, it's up to you'. This sounds promising, but is specious and naive. Can you imagine what happens when they try? Are they welcome?
- An executive being headhunted for a top job at Marks and Spencer turns it down saying, 'M&S's bureaucracy strangles leadership; you can't get anything done'. He could see trouble ahead. Yet his own leadership wasn't in doubt - in his own mind or Marks's.
- An erstwhile British Airways' chief executive was missing the point when he said to his HR director, 'Why am I surrounded by idiots; will HR please train them to be leaders?' What do you think senior managers thought about his analysis? Was it them? Was it him? Was it 'the system'?

leadership.com). It is based on organisation development (OD) principles, not on management development (MD) ones.

The OD route to improving leadership calls for more than individual development designed in an organisationally aware context. It includes leadership of, by and for the organisation as a result of taking action directly on *how the organisation works to deliver leadership*. Such improvement action enables appropriate leadership to flourish; that is, leadership that the organisation has worked out it needs in order to prosper: leadership that is clear, present, extensive, positive, responsible, and different from what it has been in the past.

Why place such an emphasis on the organisation? Because the organisation determines the leadership it gets, not individuals. The organisation is where the business's purpose lies and its customers. It's where you see what leadership is currently used for, where you find the new business challenges, and learn what leadership is needed for - what it is in the organisation that leadership needs to act upon and change, and how leadership itself needs to be different.

To fulfil this agenda, the organisation provides managers with structure and

hierarchy, with systems, policies, protocols, rules, budgets, and with resources, careers and status. The organisation provides managers with their relationships, with followers, colleagues, collaborators and competitors. It is where you find the leadership culture and ethos that conveys the organisation's values and carries the norms of everyday acceptable leadership behaviour. It shows how power is used and abused, and the depth of darkness in the shadows.

The organisation contains the processes - often inadequate - by which leaders are held to account and which determine what they can get away with. It's where managers encounter obstacles when they try to display leadership in the face of cultural inertia and politics that thwart their energy. It's where they brush up against pressure to retain the *status quo*. In short, it's a psychological minefield.

In the face of this evidence, why do so many people hold to the isolated hero model of leadership rather than an integrated, systemic one? To give managers skills and permission to lead while failing to attend to the organisation can be a waste of talent, time and money. It may help individuals with their careers, but will scarcely touch the organisation's own needs. By 'attending to the

organisation' we mean examining, understanding and considering the impact that the above 'variables' have on the exercise of leadership in practice: then directly developing these elements - and not just individuals - where they need improvement.

To use a familiar analogy, if you have an aquarium where the fish are lacklustre the typical development paradigm says brighten them up with some training, but don't bother to clean out the fish tank. It's worse than that: don't bother to examine the tank for toxicity. We expect the fish to shine regardless. We probably don't even notice the tank; we've been trained only to see the fish.

Indeed, we've been trained to believe that all that managers need to become leaders is training, targets and incentives. We look straight through the organisation and don't see the effect it's having. By contrast, the new paradigm puts the organisation itself under the spotlight and wants the cleaners to start their work there.

The OD and MD approaches oppose each other

The OD and MD approaches to improving leadership take opposing positions over means versus ends. To understand this, look at the OD resource pack in *Transforming Your Authority* (in the local government sense, not, ironically, in the sense of leaders' personal authority). This puts forward the familiar argument for injecting context into development programmes. While you can't argue against that advice, it isn't enough to qualify as OD.

The examples given are cases of the development tail wagging the dog. That positions the organisation as the means by which development (the end) is made more effective. But development

should be the means, and organisational 'transformation' the end.

Instead of 'How can the organisation improve leadership development?' ask 'How can leadership development improve the organisation?' This not-so-subtle shift of mindset is both simple and profound. Your search for improved leadership takes you out of the classroom into the bowels of the organisation.

When you start digging, what might you find? June 2005 saw a high-profile case of poor and defensive leadership in local government. Lisa Arthurworrey was the disgraced social worker at the heart of the series of mistakes in Haringey Social Services department that failed to prevent Victoria Climbié's murder in 2000. In June 2005 Arthurworrey launched a legal attempt to win back her good name. She argued that she had been made a scapegoat to protect senior officers in Haringey Council. Her appeal was successful.

Reported systems deficiencies included an unreasonably high caseload, lengthy investigation of cases lasting months and even years, a culture that was hostile to cooperating with the police (there was a sign pinned on the wall 'No Police'), flawed local procedures at odds with national guidance, an absence of supervision, a lack of people for social workers to share case worries with, and an unclear structure of accountability.

To return to the opening point, such issues are about leadership. To improve how well the organisation is led requires the ability and willingness to look at the dirty fish tank. Issuing edicts and blaming, firing or retraining individuals doesn't work. You need to examine the way the system works to deliver leadership, not just the way individuals work. The latter is a job for management; but reforming a seriously flawed system takes leadership.

What does systems leadership look like? Paradoxically, it takes leadership to see that the problem calls for leadership. In the jargon of systems thinking, 'it requires a super-leadership system from the top of the organisation to disturb the status quo, to issue a specific challenge to change the way the organisation works, to license an appropriate leadership system that involves front-line staff in designing and monitoring the improvements, and to clarify where accountability lies and for what' (taken from a silo-busting workshop conducted by Perception Dynamics).

Not the leader's job to think of solutions

It is not the leader's job to think of solutions. But it is the leader's job to agree an overall minimum standard and to manage a means by which executives are held accountable - jointly and severally - for how they propose to meet that standard by working with others. This model of leadership pulls change upwards rather than pushing change downwards.

If you want to unlock leadership, start looking in the right place - that is, what surrounds people more than the people themselves. To coin a phrase, it's the organisation, *stupid!* ■

William Tate is an organisation strategist. He was formerly British Airways' Head of Management Training. His consultancy, Prometheus Consulting, founded in 1991, specialises in leadership, organisation and management development, change and learning.
www.prometheus-consulting.com
Bill.tate@prometheus-consulting.com