

Conversations for Leaders

Helping people achieve things they never dreamt they could

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Leadership and Management

Subtle but crucial differences

Leaders achieve as much as they can with as little effort, taking into account far more factors in a decision. Confident to act when facts are unknown or at odds with their intuition or values, they are often better informed, and draw on their experience and knowledge more effectively. They reflect rather than react, and operate strategically – working on more complex problems, over longer time-scales despite distractions.

Some people say leadership is all about **performance**, that members of a top team, for instance, must 'focus', 'set their sights higher', 'aim for the sky' and 'achieve the unachievable'. But there's little evidence that this makes any real or lasting difference. Performance is an approach to life; it isn't leadership.

The importance of clear beliefs and values: True leadership is an undefinable quality giving someone the ability to inspire others to contribute the extra bit that makes the difference. True leaders draw on their inner wisdom – their gut-feel, based on well-founded personal values – and communicate them persuasively – in almost all they do.

Attitudes and learning from experiences: When we consider someone's fitness for a role we usually think of four elements – knowledge, skills, attitudes and experience. Established managers usually have all the job-specific knowledge and skills that we would expect of them – indeed, this sometimes leads them to expect promotion and become frustrated when it isn't forthcoming. Time and time again, the reasons given for someone not being promoted any further are their attitudes and how they (fail to) learn from their experiences.

Left to their own devices many people accept experiences that reinforce how they see things already and reject those that don't. Similarly, it is relatively easy to apply solutions that worked in the past to situations that happen today, only to find that the circumstances are subtly different.

Leadership development concentrates on these three strands: clarity of beliefs and values, ability to learn from experience; the set of attitudes that the leader possesses.

Equipping individuals as leaders

Organisations depend on leaders – they are their lifeblood

It is only through leadership that organizations evolve and grow. The challenge they face is how to prepare the next generation for what is an uncertain future with unspecified demands.

Are leaders born or can they be nurtured? This is a perennial debate, though personally I strongly believe in the latter, though this may be slowly from childhood or abruptly due to dramatic circumstances. Leadership is a personality trait – latent, a little rough at the edges, needing empowerment – and it can always be nurtured.

A tragic waste of talent: Once they have experienced leadership in one context they can be helped to apply it in others, though for some sadly this won't happen and that is a tragic waste. I have known exceptional leaders in youth groups, elected councils, among charity volunteers, and the reserve forces, whose leadership potential has been lost by 'corporates' whose systems (and a degree of arrogance) prevent them from nurturing these people for leadership in a different setting. Similarly, I have seen individuals 'branded' as lacking leadership potential go on to outstanding positions of leadership elsewhere (including several members of the House of Commons and House of Lords, Chairs of public bodies, magistrates and Trustees).

So, how do we help our leaders, whether already in position or aspiring to it?

Management Colleges are excellent at improving knowledge and developing skills and so are relevant earlier in the career of a leader, but they rarely address attitudes and can only explore past experiences not our use of them later.

In the past, emerging leaders might develop a relationship with a mentor. Often over lunch, they would explore life, and benefit from the older person's experience and insights. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with this, though it depends on the nurturing skills of the mentor, the relevance of their wisdom and the mentors' personal agenda.

In recent years, there was a growth in the field of coaching and many leaders turned to this for help in developing themselves. While there's a lot to be said for this, it too is fraught with dangers. Some coaches are highly responsible individuals with many years of experience and undoubtedly offer a great deal in terms of decision making and situational analysis. Sadly though, many coaches know nothing about the nature of attitudes and how to scientifically help an individual transition them safely. Many have little relevant experience and their training can be frighteningly limited.

It amazes me how some HR directors allocate a member of their executive team to an outsider who has no formal qualifications, does not follow a recognized code of ethics, doesn't have their work supervised, and yet tinkers with the belief system that made that executive so effective in the past.

We need to recognize the leadership potential around us, see that the principle need is to develop an effective set of leadership attitudes, and nurture those skillfully and safely.



Leadership conversations

Developing a sense of self and our influence on others

There is an alternative. The kind of leadership development that I specialize in - helping successful executives take the next leap forward - developing their sense of themselves, enabling them to draw on their own sense of what is right and wrong, seeing through their own motives to understand what drives them, and how to turn this to their advantage and to the advantage of their company.

The process is enjoyable, profound, and affects all aspects of their life. It starts from where they are and builds on that foundation.

For a decade now, senior managers in a wide range of industries, have found themselves 'in conversation' with me. They usually find me by recommendation - from a friend, their HR Director or Chief Executive - often someone who has first hand experience of working with me.

My background

Experience, approach, protection and integrity

Building on a PhD in behavioural science, my early career was spent in the field of organization development. I've helped firms of all sizes, in most sectors, and across several continents, achieve a shift in culture that has made them more productive, more effective, and more enjoyable to work in. My approach has featured in many articles and several books, and I've been fortunate to be awarded a couple of unusual honours for it. Along the way, I founded small firms, helped lead medium-sized ones, and spent some time as a Group HR Director of one massive company.

What makes me different is that, as a part of my own ongoing personal development, I undertook a six-year training in psychotherapy and counselling. What I offer is NOT psychotherapy; it is a form of companionship on a personal journey - one that is lived through the world of work. From my training, I have acquired important skills that enable people to safely explore their beliefs and values and re-balance those that might hinder or enhance their leadership potential.

Drawing on a repertoire of accepted theoretical frameworks, I help leaders understand the detail of a situation in ways that they often never considered.

I expect my clients to be constantly learning and open to new ways, so it should go without saying that my own work is supervised by someone whose expertise, experience and insights I have learned to trust, protecting my clients and enabling me to develop too. Working within the codes of ethics of my professional bodies, I believe in total confidentiality, am a CCC Registered Counsellor, and carry relevant professional indemnities.

Whereas some coaches claim to work exclusively in this field, I am happy to say that I have what Charles Handy described as a 'portfolio career'. If you are interested in the other threads of this, then you are welcome to visit my website. Apart from the broad experience this gives me, it means I am not dependent on a single client for a substantial element of my income - there are no conflicting agendas and I can give the individual complete un-biased support.



Not unique, but certainly... different, safe and effective

This approach is not unique, there are a few of us who offer this kind of support, though it is not common either. Nor is it 'frightening'. I am not a 'shrink', I do not use hypnosis or any other unconscious manipulations, and I come from the perspective that my clients are already highly regarded, and are seeking to achieve more, not to be derailed!

Don't take my word for it, my clients have plenty to say...

"I don't think you really know what an impact you have!" JS, HRD

"I would gladly give you a reference any time. Our 'chats' were on the mark every time. Your observations astute. And, even when I put you on the spot, I knew I could trust you." DF, CE

"Your way of looking at things, and way of feeding them back, baffles me. You manage to make me aware of home truths, but I feel encouraged at the same time." PW, MD

"I was ready to give up. Frankly, I had. I never expected to look back after five years and see how much more I could achieve and how my life has unfolded." JT, TD



"Profound. Almost taught me too much!" TY, MD

"You're a one, you really are! A real challenge at times - and it was tough, but what an outcome. And I'm sure we've not stopped yet." MS, CE

"At the time, we did some really good work together. You brought vision and insight, and helped me challenge myself. But the real impact is happening now. Quite simply my life and relationships are totally different." RM, CEO

"A friend. But one who doesn't get angry when things don't go the way you know they could, but instead is there to keep things gently moving forwards." BS, S

Next steps...

Most of my clients work with me on an ongoing basis, assessing the benefits and outcomes as we work together. However, they often offer to refer friends or colleagues to work with me and their feedback was that this would be easier if I offered an introductory 'pack' of sessions – the likely content of which was clearly described, and which could be taken as a stand-alone service. The accompanying leaflet, "**Nurturing leadership talent**" explains this approach in more detail.



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