DR PEPPER'S SHADOW

LEADERSHIP TRAPS, TRIPS, AND TROPES

JOHN M. GRECO

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INTRODUCTION

Leading is a dicey proposition.

The nature of my work --- both pre- and post- career pivot to organization development consulting --- has often positioned me close enough to leaders to learn a lot about leadership directly from them. The situations they were confronted with and their behaviors as they attempted to lead were often perplexing to me! I saw them at times misdiagnose. I saw them at times take the easy way out. I also saw them at times reject the easier play and make the tough decision. And I saw them, at times, overmatched.

My OD study and practice gave me important context to make more nuanced judgments of the leadership behaviors I was seeing. I was more able to resist demonizing individual leaders; I was able to shift and see the organizational complexity that they faced. I was (sometimes) positioned to provide insights on their challenges, often with regard to their substantial influence and impact on their people. And I was able (sometimes) to speak truth to power about the traps, trips, and tropes that they were falling prey to.

This curated collection of blog posts offers a glimpse into what I was seeing, doing, thinking and believing from my OD side car.

Judging from the comments from blog readers, my observations and interpretations resonated. For example, here are three readers/leaders in their own words ---

"John, this post [Dr Pepper's Shadow] *really hit home. I sometimes think that no matter what we do as leaders, the shadow is really hard to lessen... I think we all just need to be as genuine as we can, and know that at the end of the day, we can only control how we behave, and what we say, and not what other people think or do in reaction to that."*

"The first 'feeling' I got when reading your post [Not Pretty] *was 'the poison of complacency' and that was certainly a good reminder. Complacency can kill an army of giants!"*

"So, your statement [Born, Not Made] *is true...servant leaders are born. One cannot make himself into a servant leader through effort and intellect. But one CAN be born again! My point? Those who seek leadership should seek rebirth."*

We begin with *No Whining No Problem* --- Have you ever heard a manager tell a subordinate (maybe you?) - "Look, don't come to me with just the problem; come prepared to propose a solution or two."

Uh oh. It's a trap and a trip and a leadership trope, all rolled into one...

NO WHINING NO PROBLEM

"Don't bring me problems, bring me solutions."

"Next time figure out what's wrong before running it up the flag pole."

"When you identify a problem and bring me a solution, even if it's a poor solution, it shows a level of effort."

"It's easy to identify problems and look to others to solve for you. That's called whining."

--- Variations on a theme
found during a Google search...

You with all that? I'm not with all that.

And I'll tell you straightaway why not --- when you make awareness of a problem conditional on having the *solution* for that problem, you are only driving problems away from awareness.

And that's a way bigger problem. You with that?

Look, I'm all for initiative and personal responsibility. But, quite often, solving problems require a whole lot more than initiative and personal responsibility...

Like when there are a lot of moving parts. Like when there needs to be research, and data, to really see the patterns and understand the interdependence among the parts. Like when diagnosing what's going on requires collaboration and involves discussion.

Of course, not all problems are complex. There are problems that really do only require initiative to address.

And, yes, there are people who are lazy, without initiative, who would rather whine than think. Who would rather complain than explain. Who would rather diss than fix.

So, like most everything, this isn't black or white and always or never.

But the risk/reward is not equal. The upside of the don't bring me problems, bring me solutions approach is not worth the downside of reduced visibility to problems, is it?

Think about how hard it might be for people to communicate problems without solutions when they fear that you might consider that whining ...

When you make awareness of a problem conditional on having the solution for that problem, you are only driving problems away from awareness.

And then when you consider how this all can translate into a *keep your head down in the foxhole, don't say anything at all* culture ...

No whining no problem ends up being a real problem.

NOT PRETTY

Originally published July 15, 2013

Pablo Picasso was painting Gertrude Stein's portrait.

Gertrude said, "I don't look like that."

Picasso replied, "You will."

- Cited by James Baldwin in a
1984 *Paris Review* interview.

Whoa! Ouch!
How about Pablo; painting it like he will see it!

And, judging by her reaction, Gertrude didn't think it was a pretty picture ...

* * * * *

There's one or two OD/change management lessons here. Yeppir ...

First off, how the organization performs in the future may hardly resemble how the organization is performing today...

Time --- aging --- will have its way. Things will change.

Without the critical development of structure, process, culture, and talent, time --- and change --- will wreak havoc. Capabilities will erode. New capabilities will be needed.

What is needed is an artist's rendition of that future picture; and it's needed now ...

Luckily, there actually are people in organizations that have that prophetic artistic vision. They are scattered throughout; they do their day jobs in plain sight, with diverse titles, and responsibilities, working from the top, bottom, and middle of the organization chart ...

I'm not quite sure there is any better gift to leaders than a projection of what will happen over time and through change.

All they need is a blank canvass, and the opportunity.

And a healthy dose of courage.

For, like Gertrude, leaders will likely not like what they paint.

"We don't look like that" they will say, with some indignation. Because the portrait of the organization's future is, well, not pretty.

"But we will ..." is the sometimes timid, sometimes frustrated, sometimes exasperated response.

*   *   *   *   *

I remember a long time ago running into a particularly striking list of critical leadership attributes.

The first one was "see reality." I couldn't quite wrap my head around that at the time.

Now, I'm not quite sure there is any better gift to leaders than a projection of what will happen over time and through change.

1. The people with the special ability to project need to paint the picture like they see it. Like it will be.

2. And the leaders need to see it; really see it; and start making plans …

If not … not pretty.

For real.

DEAD ON AROUSAL

Originally published April 5, 2012

"Have we lost our passion for service? When did people become complacent? We're misfiring on the fundamentals . . . we must reinstate the passion for service."

--- Comment by a senior vice-president, in a Fortune 100 executive directors' meeting announcing the new fiscal year initiatives.

This is one of my all-time favorite executive comments by an actual leader in an actual organization.

We need to unpack this comment to discover its, well, impotence. He starts out solid. Have we lost our passion for service? This is an interesting inquiry. We don't know who "we" is at this

point; but since he is a senior executive speaking to other senior executives, it is not a stretch to conclude that he is actually indicting himself and challenging his leader peers. If so, it is an impressive example of executive accountability. And surely it is plausible that a team of senior leaders might indeed "lose their passion for service" as they become successful...

But then a quick pivot from "we" to "people:" When did people become complacent? Whoa! People? Who is he talking about? Now we call into question that he's talking about the execs in the room; that may have been plausible with the pronoun "we" but not with the otherness of "people" ... So, reluctantly, we must now walk back from the executive accountability thinking; it is likely now that the "we" in the first phrase was more of an "our company" slant...

There is another aspect of the shift from "we" to "people" that is more troublesome. If he is talking about himself and the people in the room, we might believe that the characterization of "complacency" is an observation, or in other words, observable fact. He might have himself experienced a complacency, and he might have seen a complacency in his peers in the daily course of executive interactions. But when he attributes the complacency to the more nondescript "people", we suspect it is more an inference than an observation.

This is important. If it is an inference, how does he know it is true? How does he know that people are complacent? Is he going to cite any data that makes it clear that not only have service levels declined, but that that decline can be attributed to people's complacency? A few facts will be helpful.

But he doesn't cite any facts next; instead, he moves to his diagnosis --- We're misfiring on the fundamentals. (Did you notice he reverted back to "we?" Hmmm ...)

And, as you would expect of a senior executive, he then articulates a corrective course of action: ... we must reinstate the passion for service.

I wish I could consult with this executive ---

- How did you come to believe this?
- What are you seeing that suggests that people are com-plalent?
- What do you think caused the complacency?
- Did your internal in-process metrics and scorecards and dashboards pick up on this? If not, why not do you think? If so, what action was taken? If none, why not do you think?
- How will you reinstate the passion?
- Certainly you don't believe that some 100,000 people woke up one morning without their usual "passion for service" and decided that day and days forward to be "complacent?"

This is a classic demonstration of the predisposition of leaders to attribute problems to peo-ple. Really, though, it is a "hard on the people, soft on the problem" approach, be-cause it has no ability to af-fect any real change. It is yet another example of no lever-age. It has no chance what-soever of seeding growth, improvement, performance.

Large scale, organizational wide slippage in a metric like service is not caused by people. The answer is always in the system.

Now I don't really want to make this about leader bashing (I would be convicted, if charged, given past offenses). What it *is* about, or what I'd like to make it about, is leader --- and orga-nizational --- effectiveness.

A leader's power and considerable influence lies in their abil-ity to marshall the right resources to really see, examine, and intervene on the system. Looking for systemic influences --- looking at the dynamics of the system --- is going hard at the problem; not at the people.

Large scale, organizational wide slippage in a metric like ser-vice is not caused by people. The answer is always in the

system; something's awry in the dynamic interdependence of strategy, structure, policy, process, culture.

If "people" have "lost their passion for service" and are "complacent" and are "misfiring on the fundamentals" rest assured it is the system that is causing it.

This leader may very well be successful in reinstating a passion for service. But we all know that passion is not enough. Despite the passion, they will not be able to perform.

Dead on arousal.

But there is good news! This condition is treatable; even preventable!

That particular little blue pill is called systems thinking.

This prescription is written only when there is a burning desire to get hard on the problem.

MIND THE GAP ANALYSIS

*"You cannot solve a problem from the same
consciousness that created it.
You must learn to see the world anew."*

--- Albert Einstein

Often it's when there's a new strategic plan that's aggressive, and it's pretty evident that major change has to happen to achieve the aspiration.

Sometimes it's when a department needs to get a whole lot more efficient because it won't be able to add headcount to meet the coming peak demand for services.

Or it's when a project is simply falling short of expectations.

In every case, there's a current state, and a future state.

And a gap.

Mind the gap!

And usually we do exactly that, by executing a gap analysis.

Which is a pretty fancy way of saying that the team spends some time comparing the current situation with the future state. Comparing actual performance with potential performance.

Comparing current capabilities to projected capabilities.

Through the gap analysis the team identifies what is needed to bridge the gap and achieve success.

This is where the action planning takes place.

This is also where our friend Albert makes his appearance …

Next-level performance almost always requires doing something different. It rarely just requires doing the same things faster, or even better. It almost always requires doing things different. Or doing different things.

The team doing the gap analysis rarely delivers the plans necessary to actually bridge the gap and achieve the future state.

Look; it's not that the team is a bunch of do nothing know nothing stiffs. Far from it; they are very often strong contributors, hand-picked for the job --- logical, analytical; detail oriented, project planners and operational executioners. Without them, the current state would be nowhere near as good as it is.

But there's trouble in river city when we ask these accomplished left-brainers to conjure up creative, operationally different solutions.

Trouble with a capital T and that rhymes with P and that stands for problem.

There's a problem breaking away from past practice. There's a problem rethinking assumptions.

There's a problem challenging constraints. There's a problem thinking outside the box ... There's a problem with thinking differently.

What's needed is an outside mind or two. A different perspective. A different consciousness. A right-brained, intuitive, unfettered creative thinker.

One --- or two --- that will help the team learn to see the current-state-to-future-state challenge anew.

Mind the gap analysis.

ME AND MY CUBS TICKETS

Originally published April 30, 2012

> *"When you find yourself in a hole, the best
> thing you can do is stop digging."*
>
> --- Warren Buffet

I follow the baseball off-season trades and free agent activity; it is great fun for me, for such is what hope is made of, for Cubs fans... ☺

So every year, come February, I do the internet thing and get a couple of tickets for a mid-summer Cubs game. Then April comes; when, you know, they actually start playing real games.

It doesn't take long for my enthusiasm to wane. I mean, as of this post, it's not yet May, we're less than 25 games into a 162 game season, and the Cubs are 6 games under 500 and tied for last place ...

And I have tickets for an August game.

If this year is true to form I'll spend the next couple of months agonizing over the decision of whether I should still go to the

game. The tickets cost $120; that cost is unrecoverable. If I go, I'll burn a vacation day and sink another $100 on gas, parking, food, and beverages, to see bad baseball, up close and personal...

Now some of you may relate to the feeling that, despite the bad baseball, the rush of experiencing the magical ambiance of Wrigley Field might be sufficient pull. There is some truth to this...

But I suspect that it is not only the nostalgia of that ol' ball park that keeps me going every year; it is the fact that I cannot bring myself to cut my losses, write off the $120, and carry on, because making that choice clearly signals that I made a bad decision to buy the tickets in the first place.

Can't have that!

My quandry with my Cubs tickets is an example of the decision making trap called sunk costs --- when previous investments of time or money

We seem to have a deep-seated bias to make choices in a way that justifies our past choices.

become unrecoverable and we know that those "sunk costs" are irrelevant to making a current decision, but those costs prey on our minds and influence us to make additional bad decisions, resulting in further investments of time and/or money.

In other words, we seem to have a deep-seated bias to make choices in a way that justifies our past choices.

Mr. Buffet would say we have a predilection to keep digging.

My suspicion is that most of us have fallen into this trap, and that many of us keep falling into this trap. Yes, I am one of the many...

We may have refused to sell a stock at a loss, thereby missing the opportunity to invest in a more promising company. (I feel your pain. This one's fresh for me, too, and way more consequential than my Cubs tickets.)

We may have invested heavily into improving the performance of an employee whom we know we shouldn't have hired in the first place.

We may plan initiative after initiative and implement change after change to improve the performance of a business acquisition or organizational structure change that we simply, in retrospect, should not have pursued.

You can relate, yes? You have your own sunk cost examples, yes?

Mr. Buffet: It is very, very hard to stop digging!

I think it is this decision-making trap that is underneath why it is sometimes critically necessary to provoke a change in leadership.

A business decision that is ultimately judged as a bad decision is very visible, with serious consequences, both practical and psychological. The strategy-of-choice is often to escalate commitment and resources, throwing good money after bad, and compounding the problem.

A new leader will have unclouded eyes and unencumbered thinking. It is often why we see major change soon after a new leader is named. They didn't dig the holes...

Another solution to this trap is to design a structure or process mechanism whereby future assessments of viability are not owned by the original decision makers. I will soon be implementing a variation of this strategy, relating to my investment portfolio...

The lesson here is not that we should avoid making bad decisions. When we're making decisions, we will inevitably make some bad ones. The lesson is to admit the mistake, not throw good money (and time and energy) after bad; instead cut your losses, and go forward.

In other words stop digging.

But it is very, very hard!

At least for me, since, yes, I will be at the Cubs game in August … but just you wait until next year!

This post draws from a Harvard Business Review article The Hidden Traps of Decision Making.

IT DOES NOT FOLLOW

Originally published September 3, 2012

*"You don't manage people; you manage things.
You lead people."*

— Admiral Grace Hopper

Awhile back I recall being on a regional conference call with the VP, his regional staff, and his district directors. The topic of the day was how to increase the productivity of the delivery drivers. The region's labor costs were over budget, and driver wages were the lion's share of the variable expenses. So they needed to get faster...

I was getting increasingly frustrated with the conversation. I was hearing nothing but quick fixes; I now call them fixes that fail because they ultimately make things worse after making

things temporarily better. I kept hearing these simplistic directives that implied a measure of control that was, well, in my calculus, ridiculous.

I remember thinking to myself if they have such control, why are we having this conversation? If they are in control, end of story, no? Just tell them to work faster, no?

I think I said something to this effect on the call. But it's possible my memory is playing tricks on me.

* * * * *

Performance management is a non sequitur.

The origin of non sequitur, from latin, translates "it does not follow." When I hear management being practiced in terms of control and authority, coercion and force, I cringe.

Performance does not follow.

People, unlike things, feel and think! They assess. They ascertain. They consider. They project.

They imagine. They analyze. They calculate. They judge.

And, ultimately, they choose. Management control is a myth.

When managed, people will --- at best --- comply. Which means they are simply making the choice to accept your authority, and they are choosing to behave within the lines that you have drawn.

Things, on the other hand, don't feel and think. They can be managed! Goals, processes, procedures, tools, resources, budgets, reports, timeframes, workflows, measurements …

Leaders manage things; and they lead people by influencing.

Influencing requires an understanding that control is a myth. It requires an awareness that people have choices and make choices. Influencing also requires leaders to trust that their people really do have the capacity to engage and make the choices that are necessary for the high functioning of the organization in its pursuit of its mission.

Manage things; lead (influence) people.

For now, let's grossly summarize leading as providing a meaningful business aspiration; communicating clear and timely information regarding the who/what /when/where/how, involving them when problem solving and implementing change, and supporting them with sufficient tools, technologies, and other resources.

* * * * *

That conference call ended as most do; action items with little leverage. But the VP was slowly clarifying his philosophy. It was a work-in-progress for sure, especially in terms of its execution, but I remember its five parts distinctly ---

- Grow the business.
- Serve the customers.
- Lead the people.
- Manage the numbers.
- Support the community.

People follow when leaders lead.

DR PEPPER'S SHADOW

Originally published March 22, 2012

One day, an executive decides to have lunch in the associate cafeteria for the first time. Immediately recognized, she chats with associates as she works through the line choosing her meal. When she gets to the beverage cooler, she looks at the brands and flavors available, then offhandedly comments, "Hmm, no Dr Pepper" as she reaches for a Coke. She proceeds to the register and enjoys her lunch.

The next day, the associates notice that the beverage cooler now contains nothing but Dr Pepper ...

[Author unknown, but greatly appreciated! If you or anyone you know has a proprietary interest in this story please authenticate and I will be happy to credit, or remove, as appropriate.]

Hmmmm…

I've related this story numerous times over the years, in several different companies holding distinctive cultures. Every time, I ask the same exact question: "What do you think happened here?"

At one company in particular, across several facilitations, the response was always the same: the executive mandated Dr Pepper for the beverage cooler!

What does this say about this culture?

But we need to slow down … because that particular answer was more common than any other. Across several different companies. Each with a distinctive culture.

Interesting, isn't it? So maybe the better question is: "What does this say about how we view our leaders?"

Leaders have long shadows.

But we need to slow down again. We need to consider that it is certainly possible that the CEO did, in fact, mandate nothing but Dr Pepper in the beverage cooler. This is a plausible interpretation.

Plausible, but likely dead wrong.

How about … the supervisor of the cafeteria overheard the CEO's comment, attributed meaning to it, and changed the beverage cooler of his own volition. It is quite likely that the CEO had nothing whatsoever to do with the change, and will likely never know that her off hand comment had such an effect …

Even more scary are the unfounded assumptions people make when they see all that Dr Pepper in the cooler …. a day after the CEO joined the common folk for lunch … and was upset that her cherished Dr Pepper wasn't available in her cafeteria …

Leaders have long shadows.

When our Dr Pepper executive reads an email on her way to work that upsets her a bit; consequently she doesn't quite acknowledge her admin when she arrives at her office; is it so

hard to believe that a half hour later the entire office has a heads up to lay low and beware?

When our Dr Pepper executive steps out of a strategy meeting in the middle of a discussion exploring a new product line, is it so hard to believe the absence of the product line from the final draft of the strategic plan?

When our Dr Pepper executive …

Such a burden this must be! Everything seemingly falls within the shadow.

Leaders: Can you relate to this? Can you recall specific instances that would suggest that you indeed have a much longer shadow than you might previously have believed?

You may not be able to see it. But trust me: you have Dr Pepper's shadow.

TRUST AND CONFIDENCE

Originally published January 17, 2015

I was in a management meeting several years ago, supporting my client, the regional VP. In the meeting, the VP was addressing the district's management team.

They were underperforming. He was speaking to their underperformance.

At one point he noted that it wasn't so much that he didn't trust them --- he did --- he simply was losing confidence in them.

I was sitting in the last row, in the back of the room. I saw the agitation; this sentiment clearly hit a nerve.

The seasoned manager sitting next to me leaned over and angrily muttered "That's bull#%&! ... he doesn't trust us; period."

I didn't think that was quite right.

In hushed tones I whispered back that I didn't think that was quite right. He wanted to know what wasn't quite right? ... and I couldn't articulate why I thought that, other than feebly mumbling that trust and confidence weren't the same thing.

"How aren't they the same thing?"

I had no good answer.

I do now.

That VP was not questioning the character of

It's almost always about shortfalls in capability. Ill-intent and poor character are very definitely the exception.

the management team in front of him. He was not calling into question their intent. He wasn't doubting that they cared about their people .... and their customers ... and about providing an exceptional service ... efficiently ...

What he was questioning was their competence; their capability to deliver results; results that would meet current expectations.

He trusted them ... he just didn't have confidence in them.

* * * * *

If I knew then what I know now, I would have continued the conversation with this manager ... because I am not so sure that I can say the same thing when describing how that manager felt about the VP.

What I mean is, I strongly suspect that manager --- and perhaps a critical mass of that management team --- did not trust that VP.

You now should immediately wonder if I am talking about the character/intent aspect or the capability/results aspect. Do I mean that the management team is questioning this leader's motivation? Or perhaps I mean that they have lost confidence in this leader's ability to lead them effectively?

This is why this trust and confidence distinction is so important I think.

It doesn't matter if we're looking up at our leaders and expressing a lack of trust in their leadership, or if we're looking down and expressing a lack of confidence in our teams ... or we're looking across at peers ... the inferred opinion, overwhelmingly, is one of questioning motivation; intention; character.

And that sets in motion cascading actions that take everyone further away from productivity and effectiveness.

Consider: Given near constant changes in expectations, it should be no surprise that at slices in time we actually are incompetent.

And when there are skill and knowledge and process gaps, if there aren't timely on target investments to build capability --- and here I'm thinking governance, policy, structure, process, technology, and training --- we increasingly underperform.

It's almost always about shortfalls in capability. Ill-intent and poor character are very definitely the exception.

So it's not really not trusting! It's almost always having no confidence.

To actualize this thinking, my always-a-work-in-progress behavior change --- with partners, and clients, and friends, and family --- is to be more explicit when I generically express a lack of trust, and to have a strong bias toward inferring a competence/capability problem instead of a motivation/intention problem.

And here's what that might sound like ---

> *I trust what you're doing; I believe you want to do the right thing for the right reasons. I just don't have high confidence in your current ability to do what needs to be done, and to get the results that are expected. Let's talk about this ...*

* * * * *

It wasn't just fourteen years of pondering (!) that led me to this newfound ability to articulate why trust and confidence aren't the same thing.

It was my participation a few months ago in a training session on Stephen M. R. Covey's *The Speed of Trust*. The concepts, exercises, and tools raised my capability ...

I can't help but wonder if that manager next to me in that meeting simply attributed my response to him as a knee-jerk defense of my client. In other words, questioning *my* motivation ... and, by extension, *my* character.

I'm sure you can see how this could very well be so ...

BORN, NOT MADE

A band of men are on a journey. One man named Leo accompanies the men, doing their menial chores, and sustaining them with his spirit and song.

All goes well with the journey until Leo disappears. The group falls into disarray and the journey is abandoned. It seems that they cannot make it without their servant Leo.

After many years of wandering, one of the men in the group that took the journey finds Leo. He finds out that Leo is actually the titular head of the organization that sponsored the journey. He was the leader even as he attended to the needs of the men on the journey many years ago.

The great leader was seen and experienced as servant first.

--- Adapted from a citation found in Robert Greenleaf's *Servant Leadership*, summarizing the story of Herman Hesse's *Journey to the East*.

Servant leadership. Servant-leader. Leader as servant first. Servant leadership emphasizes the leader's role as steward of the resources (human, financial and otherwise) provided by the organization. It encourages leaders to serve others while staying focused on achieving results in line with the organization's values.

Servant leadership differs from other leadership approaches by eschewing the common top-down hierarchical style, instead emphasizing collaboration, trust, empathy, and the ethical use of power.

Leo was a servant leader.

Is this possible for real?

I remember once getting into a heated argument about whether leaders are born or made. My colleague was making a cogent argument that leaders are born. Leadership development was essentially a scam, he said, an operating-on-the-edges activity that produced marginal leadership behaviors that did not translate into results.

Servant leadership is a different animal entirely. Caring is required. A willingness and commitment to serve.

Of course I countered with an argument that leadership has been extensively researched, and that there is in fact a leadership science that can be studied, learned, applied, and executed, to good effect.

I'm not entirely sure, but I think I was wrong.

I have serious doubts now that managers can actually learn to be great leaders.

I still believe that leadership development can teach the essentials of leadership. I do believe that emerging leaders can learn principles and practices that can help them lead their people and their organizations.

But I think learning and development produces men and women who know about leadership, and may begin to lead; and even lead effectively.

But servant leadership is a different animal entirely. Caring is required. A willingness and commitment to serve.

Can caring, and a willingness and commitment to serve, be learned and/or developed?

I have my doubts.

More likely born, not made.

But possible and real, I do believe.

Do you?

FAILING THE MARSHMALLOW TEST

Originally published October 22, 2012

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

Okay, we all get the gist of this one.

The sure thing is better than the possibility of getting something better.

Maybe, maybe not. Isn't there something to *nothing ventured nothing gained*? How much better is the other alternative? And what is the probability that I can get that something better? Do you promise that there's two in the bush and can I be pretty confident that I can catch them?

All rational, logical, relevant questions, no?

You remember the marshmallow test? A group of four-year olds were given a marshmallow, but they were told if they could wait to eat it they could have a second one. Some kids were able to wait and others couldn't.

Some kids have impulse control, others don't. Some can delay gratification; others not so much.

Big deal.

Turns out it actually was; the extended study of these kids revealed that those with the ability to wait for the second marshmallow scored higher on their SATs...

So much for a bird in the hand...

Except that now we have new data from an enhanced marshmallow test, adding an interesting twist.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JsQMdECFnUQ&feature=player_embedded

So if we don't trust the environment ... the odds shift in favor of staying with the bird in the hand.

Interesting, no? Interesting, but, again, big deal. So what!?!

Ahhh ... this is a *very big* deal.

At work, it plays into engagement, productivity, quality, and turnover.

Reliable environments really matter.

When we're engaged at work, we are more productive; we produce better quality; and we stay, because we are contributing, and it is satisfying. For our contributions, we are paid, of course, but there's the promise of more, and that factors into the equation.

What happens when the environment is perceived to shift a bit? Either there isn't quite the opportunity to utilize your expertise, or the juicy projects once promised to you go to others, or maybe the organization has hit some speed bumps, and the information coming from the leaders isn't quite as, well, forthcoming.

Slipping into disengagement is characterized by increasingly dwelling on not what you give, but what you get. The compel-

ling mission of the organization no longer drives your discretionary effort. The promise of future opportunity as the organization grows doesn't hold quite the sway it once did.

A day's work for a day's pay. A bird in the hand. The promise of a second marshmallow holds no sway, if the promise is perceived as unreliable. The parking lot is largely empty at five o'clock.

The larger --- in life --- implications are troubling ...

- If there's little hope of climbing out of poverty, why should the poor continue to work those minimum wage jobs? (It's become somewhat in vogue to demonize the disadvantaged and attribute their condition to their laziness or other weak and unflattering traits, but the much stronger attribution is to a palpable distrust that the system does not enable realization of that "American Dream" promise.)

- If there's little hope of overcoming prejudice and discrimination ----ethnic, racial, et. al. --- why should those in the cross hairs of such injustice stay in school?

- The vast majority of teachers love teaching. They also love kids. But when the outcome measurement is the test scores, their continued income screams of simply teaching to the test... and how does that reinforce the love of teaching kids? (It doesn't. It reinforces internal conflict and disengagement.)

- Is there any surprise that we have apathy and such a large population of low-information voters when the promises of the campaign trail and the tactics of the parties are questionable?

There must be some reasonable expectation of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness... for when not self-evident... there won't be impulse control. There won't be delayed gratification. There won't be increasing SAT scores. There won't be high performing organizations. There won't be life, liberty, and happiness.

There will be one bird, and not two; one marshmallow, and not another.

We can demonize and blame each other all we want for not risking the bird in the hand for the two in the bush and not keeping our eye on the second marshmallow prize, but when there's unreliability and distrust...

Trustworthy leaders and reliable environments really matter.

Failing the marshmallow test really matters.

IT ISN'T WHAT IT IS

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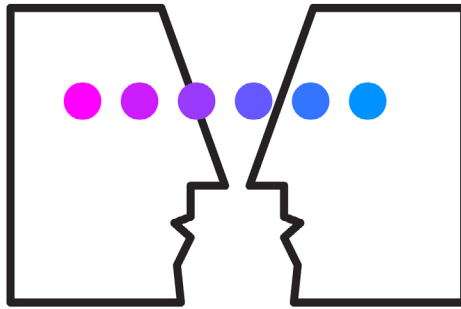
E M P A T H Y

The regional VP and I would fly into the district office. We would first meet with the district Director, and then over the course of the next two days the VP, the Director, and I would meet with each station manager in a series of rather intense "three-on-one" station review meetings.

This particular district was once again underperforming; it was the worst district in the region by far. This district's meetings were not pleasant for the district Director, and they were not pleasant for most of the managers.

One of those three-on-ones I'll remember for the rest of my life.

Scott was a young station manager, only a few months into his promotion. He took over a station that had a reputation for

being tough, intractable; and to make matters worse, the previous station manager had transferred out amid accusations of falsifying reports to prop up performance.

Scott was cleaning up the operation; doing so necessitated firing some of the previous front-line managers who simply did not want to play straight. That meant he was bearing the burden of being understaffed. And because the performance reporting was now honest, Scott's operating results were showing rather dismal year-over-year comparisons on many of the key metrics.

If the meeting were today, I'm quite sure he would have explained his situation with a matter of fact "it is what it is" but that phrase wasn't in popular use back then...

Everybody knew the situation. The RVP was going to test Scott a bit, but he was not going to go hard at him.

Scott was clearly nervous as he initiated his presentation, but most of the station managers were, so his nervousness wasn't overly conspicuous. He was doing a reasonable job explaining his difficult status and his challenging plans.

Until he said something that struck me as not quite right. It was an innocent, off-hand comment; but, to me, it seemed packed, loaded, heavy. I wanted to not hear about the numbers anymore. I wanted Scott to unpack it for me.

I distinctly remember interrupting him, timidly turning to the VP and the Director, and noting that I wanted to ask Scott a question but warning that it might take us off track a bit. The VP told me to go ahead.

"Scott, can you speak more to why you think the drivers don't respect you?"

And the floodgates opened.

We never did get back on track. Scott wasn't able to finish his presentation. He broke down; he shared that he had been working 20 hours a day; he was sleeping in his car; his marriage was in trouble; he went on... until we called a time out.

I remember the debrief afterward, and the VP wanting to talk about what we could do for Scott. I remember the district director at one point turning to me and asking how I knew to stop and ask that question, and how I knew it might lead us to something else entirely different, something important.

I didn't know how I knew. I just knew. In fact, I think it was more a feeling than a knowing. It was one of those times when feeling was knowing.

Empathy.

By me asking that question, Scott knew I knew. Or at least he knew I knew something. And it allowed him to release. He needed to release. But of course, in a leader, that is weakness...

But it isn't what it is.

Shortly after that meeting, Scott resigned. He didn't see his situation as recoverable. He may have been right. But I'm not so sure. Regardless; we'll never know.

You might be thinking that this wasn't exactly a great outcome. You might point out that this didn't end well, that we didn't improve the situation with this approach. Hard for me to argue with that.

But everyone learned something. The VP learned that he was under supporting this young leader; he likely wondered how many other young leaders he was under supporting. That's a valuable lesson in my book.

The district Director learned that she had an emotional blind spot; she likely wondered what other leader stress across her district was not being recognized and managed. That's a valuable lesson, as well.

I learned that I had something to offer that was in short supply in business circles and that I needed to trust my instincts. And that, without a doubt, was valuable too!

I don't know what Scott learned. But I want to believe he learned a lot.

I don't know where he is now. I'd like to think that he went on to realize his leadership potential, because he certainly had it; in spades.

It was just too much, too soon, for him. By all appearances, he was decisive, leading, in control, taking charge.

But sometimes it isn't what it is.

And, without empathy, we never know.

And thus, we never learn.

And thus, we can't correct.

BIG BUTS

The people follow the example of those above them.

- Chinese Proverb

We do, don't we?

I mean, sure; there are conditions ... but given those are met, we do take our lead from our leaders ...

And when leaders see markets shift ... competitors get stronger ... customers more demanding ... and technology disrupting ... they, in response, seek to change the organization's culture, fully squaring it with the challenges ahead.

They do it to stay competitive; to protect profit margins; to sustain growth.

But changing a culture is typically perceived as a rather daunting task.   In fact, some would say, impossible.

Is it possible to get hundreds or thousands of people to exhibit enhanced ownership and accountability?   Is it possible to get hundreds or thousands of people to pick up the pace? Is it possible to engender greater discretionary effort across a broad spectrum of diverse people as they work in diverse roles with widely varying skills and capabilities?

Yes, possible.

In fact, at its essence, pretty simple really.

Lead differently, and people follow, differently.

Yes; leaders actually can move the manners and methods and norms of hundreds or thousands of people to something different. Yes; leaders can drive a different way of behaving; a different way of interacting, of communicating, of problem solving, of deciding, of working.

Yes; they simply need to set the example.

C'mon, John, it can't be this simple! you say?

Actually, honestly, I think it is.

You must think me mad, at this point. Because you know better.

You do know better ... but I'm not mad!

* * * * *

The proverb, in its simplicity, has it substantially right, I think.

We do follow leaders --- when we believe them; when we have confidence in them; when we respect them.

And when they model change for the rest of us ... we take their lead, and change happens.

Yes, it is possible. Yes, but.

There are big buts.

YES, BUT: When leading by example, leaders must actually change.

Not just in words. Not just talking about what needs to change. Not talking about the behaviors that they'd like to see in everybody else. Not just in espousing a new set of organizational values.

They must actually change their behaviors. For real. They must model the behaviors they seek in others, in followers, in us. Their change must be genuine; it must be believable.

Quick example: If the CEO goes on record wanting more discussion and debate and less one-way power play decision making, his leadership meetings better reflect a shift away from PowerPoint presentations and toward table discussions exploring the issues …

YES, BUT: All leaders must be aligned and in sync.

There's nothing that will undermine a change effort quicker than some leaders not on the same page with the others, and nothing being done about it. Correcting counter cultural leader behavior is an exceptional opportunity to send a powerful message. It is also a deafening noise that will drown out the culture messaging if not addressed.

Leaders can send unambiguous change messages by updating key policies to reflect key shifts in thinking.

Tight, high performing cultures reflect tight, high performing leadership teams.

YES, BUT: Leaders must --- MUST --- make enabling changes to work policies, management norms, and budgeting practices.

This is a VERY BIG BUT! It is the epitome of leading by example, for executive leaders.

Consider that leader behaviors just aren't that visible to all employees even when the change strategy emphasizes high frequency interactions. What is visible, though, are the poli-

cies that all employees must consider when making choices at work.

Leaders can send unambiguous change messages by updating key policies to reflect key shifts in thinking. For example, instituting flexible working arrangements and a telecommuting policy would undoubtedly grab employees' attention and substantially reinforce a shift away from a paternal culture …

Even more ubiquitous than policies are the norms that managers have established to solve problems, make decisions, communicate, and manage. Targeted changes here mean business and have influence.

Of course, this requires an investment in organization development, and in management training.

Which is a natural segue into our last enabling change --- the budgeting, putting the money where the rhetoric is, sending clear messages of change in terms of where and how leaders invest dollars.

* * * * *

Those are big buts, no doubt.

They are why you know better. And they are why I'm not mad.

Because as big as they are, they pale in comparison to the power of a culture change that is leader-led and leader-modeled.

People will follow … and cultures will change.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Leaders face considerable complexity! There are always problems to solve and decisions to make. And traps, trips, and tropes to avoid.

- One natural reaction to the complexity is to "export" the problem solving. *In No Whining No Problem* we explored how that approach has unhelpful unintended consequences...

- There is often the temptation to minimize the import of the challenging and problematic issues, be they current or projected. In *Not Pretty* the admonition is for leaders to see reality and encourage realistic assessments and projections...

- *Dead On Arousal* explored misattribution of error. Too common, and so ineffective.

- *Mind the Gap Analysis* explored groupthink. The takeaway lesson: producing different action requires different thinking, and different thinking requires different minds...

- I happen to think *Me and My Cubs Tickets* is the definitive example of the leadership trap of sunk costs! Leaders should consider listening to Warren Buffett and stop digging...

- In *It Does Not Follow* the tried-but-not-always-true command and control leadership approach is very definitely a trap when attempting to lift performance...

Leading effectively is most definitely a challenge.

But wait; there's another aspect here that makes it quite the dicey proposition!

Consider that while leaders are grappling with all that complexity and all those traps, trips, and tropes, they are always being watched.

They are "always on." Their words are always being examined; subtracted from and/or added to... Their people anticipate decisions and actions, extrapolating from how they perceive their leaders' dispositions...

Consider also that we judge ourselves largely on our good intentions (even when our behaviors are not quite aligned with those good intentions!). But we hold leaders to a different standard; we judge leaders by their *behaviors*. We infer their intentions from their behaviors and, quite often, we misinterpret! Yikes!

Leaders need to know that they are always influencing us.

Leaders need to know that they have long shadows.

Consider, furthermore, that we know from change theory* that our behavior is largely a function of our prevailing context. Leaders, casting their long shadows, are quite often our predominant context...

In a very real sense, then, leader behavior is a force multiplier, for either productive thinking and aligned action, or counterproductivity. It is common and quite often deserved for leaders to take the credit when downline productive thinking and aligned action are in evidence. Owning up to their role in the counterproductivity, however, is another matter entirely.

And why that is, is perhaps the most exasperating part. Leaders, while leading, don't see the shadow that they are casting!

But there is hope: the more they are aware of their shadow, the higher the odds that they will "shine a light" on it. They can move from feeling good about their intentions (natural, but not helpful) to examining their own behaviors. They can then factor their insights into their problem solving, decision making, and, if empathy-enabled, their support planning.

Leaders need to be "heads up" to see the traps, trips and tropes. And always aware of the considerable shadow they cast.

What do you think? Would love to hear from you... johngreco@odeaconsulting.com

For a more substantive discussion of change theory please see *A New Beach: Insights for Better Change,* the first e-book in this series.

Odea is an organization development practice that helps leaders, teams, and HR professionals enable change, build organizational capability, and drive results.

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Inspired by the intrigue and ever flowing lessons he experienced while working within diverse organizational cultures, John began blogging his work and life insights in 2012, creating johnponders.com.

John has been practicing his unique principled commitment to excellence as an organizational consultant for over thirty-five years. He is the founder of ODEA, an organization development consultancy that he hopes will continue his life's work into semi-retirement.

John has earned a Master of Science in Organization Development from Loyola University Chicago and holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration from the University of Illinois.

John is married to wife Jamie and has one adult son (Jesse). Living in Elgin Illinois USA, John is a life-long Cubs fan still basking in the glory of their epic 2016 World Series win...