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Leader, know yourself.

Rita Marcella

Over the last fifteen years as Dean of Aberdeen Business School at Robert Gordon University I have been asked many times for my thoughts on leadership.

I've spoken about leadership challenges, leadership styles and most recently collaborative leadership. Equally there are fashions and trends in thinking about leadership with much attention focusing recently on concepts of authentic or trusted leadership.

My own deep seated belief, established over these many years of reading, thinking and observing leaders in action – both in the business and political domain – is that the most important characteristic of great leadership is the capacity to be self-reflective.

There are various ways in which you can enhance your own personal leadership and it is absolutely helpful to engage in these. These might take the form of executive development courses, where you will establish a network of peers – a great resource with whom to test your thinking and talk about your challenges.

You might enrol in an MBA – a much more stretching and testing environment where again you have access to a network of peers but also to the thinking of theorists, the academy and experienced leaders. You might find or be assigned a mentor. This can be a great resource although not all mentoring relationships work and much will depend on the individuals involved – for as ever for things to work much will depend on the people involved.

However, the most important way in which you can enhance your leadership performance is to engage in activities which help you to learn more about yourself. Here too there are a variety of techniques that can be applied. The 360 degree appraisal, for example, seeks data from senior managers, peers and those you manage enabling feedback that highlights your strengths and limitations by actively seeking to identify areas in which you might improve.

By engaging positively in this kind of reflection a leader can learn not only what others appreciate in their style but also what causes concern. From a 360 degree appraisal I learned not to commit too quickly to a decision when approached by staff with a request and without thinking through the consequences.

Psychometric tests of various kinds such as Myers Briggs and the concept of personalities as represented by colours which indicate your dominant preferences in terms of communication help the leader to understand that they will tend to respond in particular ways to situations according to their personalities; for example, if you are a red/yellow person you will tend to behave in a certain way and not always in the most appropriate or considered way.

Even more importantly, engaging in this kind of self reflection also helps you to see that responding in a red/yellow way might be regarded by a blue/green person in a way you could not possibly imagine. By engaging in a group in colour analysis I discovered that what I might think of as a friendly engaging way of asking for something to be done could be regarded as chaotic and lacking clarity by many of the people who work with me.

The point about techniques such as these is that it is not enough to engage, you also have to internalise and accept the findings. I have seen too many examples of people ignoring or not

understanding the feedback about themselves as a leader. I have even done this myself, when for example feedback I was given stated very simply that ‘Professor Marcella is always right’ and my initial internalisation was that this was a wholly good thing and it was only later that I realised that it might be a wholly bad thing. The truth of course is that it is neither intrinsically good or bad, it is simply a tendency in me of which I should always be mindful and reflect whether I am being always open to the ideas of others and more willing to acknowledge that, like everyone else, I am frequently wrong.

Much has been said lately about collaborative leadership particularly in the current context of current challenges in the oil and gas industry. Successful factors in collaboration include there being additionality of benefit for all parties, the importance of taking the long view, organisational agendas intervening and, most interesting for my topic today, the leadership characteristics and styles of those leading collaboration.

The most significant personal barriers to effective leadership in collaboration are leadership ego, power hunger and defensiveness – all arguably character traits of the unreflective individual and are illustrated in Hansen’s (2009) personal barriers to good collaboration:

1. Wants power to depend on him/her
2. Wants power for its own sake
3. Has an attitude that “I know best”
4. Thinks he/she is a much smarter person than others
5. Has a hard time taking criticism
6. Has an attitude that problems tend to lie outside him/herself
7. Is afraid of losing
8. Takes defeat personally
9. Is worried about being humiliated
10. Likes the limelight
11. Is self-absorbed
12. Cultivates “an aura of personality” around him/her

While it might be argued conversely that many great leaders show evidence of some of these traits and that self confidence is a necessary prerequisite of leadership in and of itself, leaders who appear too strongly on the spectrum will inevitably create something of a toxic environment around them.

Equally while being self reflective can help leaders to understand the limitations of their behaviours they should never see this as a reason to jettison or deny their own personal style and traits – to do so would result in deeply unauthentic leadership and a complete loss of trust.

So leaders listen to feedback, particularly seek out and encourage upward communication from your workforce, be open to the views of others but also be honest with them and yourself. Acknowledge and mitigate your limitations and recognise when these are actually strengths.

Hansen, M.T. (2009) . Collaboration: how leaders avoid the traps, create unity and reap big results. Boston, Mass: Harvard Business Press, p. 161.