ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION:  
“LEADERSHIP AT A CROSSROADS…!”

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CONFERENCE THEMES:  Precarious Employment

ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION GOALS:
1) to realize the serious implications of leaders and organizations continuing to over-ride realistic boundaries in personal leadership capacity;
2) to discuss groundwork processes being undertaken with a number of private and a large public organization to build both cultural and personal leadership support into everyday organizational life; and,
3) to present a case-study demonstrating the potential of the “Personal Leadership” support approach on the ability of leaders to sustain their capacities, particularly when faced with stressful and complex dilemmas.

“The task is to find identity in, at once, the power of our common humanity and the beauty of our uniqueness”.  C. Johnston
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Realizing the serious health risks facing our leaders today as expectations rise and grow beyond what is reasonable is a number one retention issue. Organizations are paying lip service to this dilemma, but in reality are only dabbling in training approaches which tend to miss the heart of sustainable leadership development. While cognitive-behavioral and skill-training modalities have promise, they are being found inadequate in helping leaders to effectively re-organize internally so as to be able to meet what is externally becoming increasingly burdensome.

This paper offers discussion on an alternative and wholistically oriented approach to Personal Leadership development that enables leaders to realign their leadership potential through chosen beliefs, values, emotions and best practice. The intent is to make it possible for leaders to sustain their capacities by putting reasonable limits on those capacities - at any one time, in any one situation. By moving leaders toward this more intentional life course, evidence is showing just how positive the returns can be for leaders, for their staff, and for their organizations! In support of this thesis, a case study is provided as an example of the transformative power of the Personal Leadership approach.

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“The new challenges, wherever we find them – from love to politics, education to economics – seem universally unresponsive to familiar kinds of solutions. Just trying harder at what we already know, however good our intentions, fails to get us where we need to go. The concerns of our time require much more than just better [programs]. They require whole new ways of understanding and being. They require that we re-ask the most elemental questions about who we are and how our world works”.

THE WEIGHTINESS OF LEADERSHIP AND PURPOSE

Everyone must have hope that their lives can make a difference! While this primal drive to influence ideas and people, to improve people’s capacity in life, to challenge systemic reform, is universal, perhaps it is in the heart and soul of the leader where such purpose takes deepest root. As our expectations of life get more excessive and complex, it is also to these same leaders that we look for answers and assurances. This mix of purpose from within, and demand from without, creates in leaders a tension that is both passionate and exhausting. For sure, these are individuals who often whole-heartedly take on the challenges of risk. They take direction when others hold back, even resist that direction. They do the unpopular for the sake of accomplishing something they strongly believe in, though that sometimes means standing alone. They intentionally place themselves in positions where they have to negotiate competing needs, their own needs often sidelined. The weight of these challenges is now getting exhausting, the rewards fewer! If leaders are going to be able to sustain their hope for making a difference, they must find ways to negotiate the minefield of expectations descending upon them. They know this negotiation of expectations must happen. They are less convinced that they have the support, energy or deep know-how necessary to actually accomplish such a stand.

A CULTURE OF EXPECTATIONS

What challenges do leaders face, even if they are willing to step up and re-negotiate the expectations coming at them? First, there is the need to recognize that the expectations may be unrealistic! Most leaders today have been raised in an era where industrial, intellectual, and technological advancements have known no bounds. We were taught that we could be whoever we wanted to be, accomplish almost anything if we just worked hard enough. This blind pursuit of what Ronald Rolheiser (2001) calls the “vital lie” of our times has fueled an existential anguish and anxiety in our generation that is unsatisfiable, boundaryless, and against the natural limits of our human capacities. The knowledge that we are capable of more than we might imagine is comforting and motivating. The lack of boundaries and wisdom around what pursuits actually have meaning for us, however, is a recipe for more of what we are already seeing – radical increases in mood disorders, physical burnout, and moral and spiritual emptiness. Interestingly enough, the reverse of these same qualities - physical strength and emotional stability, a moral compass and spiritual discipline – are necessary to carry the weight of leadership.

In organizational life, there is the still prevailing norm of promotion through unchecked work ethic. Lip service is common as organizations want to show that they are caring. Leadership Service Departments are set up to deal with the training issues of administrative staff. The reality, however, is that leaders continue to come away from expensive seminars and retreats without the “meat” that will actually make the kind of everyday difference they know they want and need to make. Top dollars are being spent on programmed approaches to leadership, programs that often have little to do with the heart of leadership drive. A case in point here is the issue of sustaining staff motivation. When faced with the growing mental health crises of
employees who complain of no longer feeling the spirit of their vocation (vs. profession), how
does the leader care for these dispirited colleagues when he/she is him/herself suffering
privately? Trying to support colleagues while also having to answer to structures and authorities
which may be at odds with such care, is a heavy burden to carry.

Finally, leaders are dealing with the impact of their own expectations – on themselves
and on others. Setting limits for, and on, themselves is not typically something leaders do well.
Their very success has hinged on stretching limits. When they run into trouble, they are often the
ones who have the most difficulty asking for, and receiving, support. They fear such will be
perceived as weak, that those under their care will feel let down. So, where does the leader go to
feel safe, to feel understood and cared about? Sadly, many remain isolated, and develop varied
forms of depressive and addictive patterns to cope. Because the cost of reaching out seems too
high, they end up paying an even higher price!

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AT A CROSSROADS

The marketplace is tuned in to this heightened need for leadership service. Particularly over
the last five years, leadership training has taken its place in organizational learning systems.
Everything from more structured cognitive-behavioral coaching models to skill-based
communication training is available. To give credit where it is due, more recent publications
have been attempting to get into the “psychology” and “character-building” of leadership.
Leading authors from Harvard Business School (Rooke and Torbert, 2005; Badaracco, 2004), for
example, discuss the ego styles of leadership. While informative and enlightening, the content of
these publications remains more descriptive than instructive. For example, ego does indeed tend
to fuel reactivity to, versus wise assessment of, a situation. Yet, how does one actually release
the intensity of ego needs when they are often survival oriented? Training in skill development is
intended to be more practical, helping participants know how to directly apply knowledge. Yet,
for all the cognitive and behavioral skill we might have, why don’t we just do what we
supposedly know how to do? What are the actual internal barriers which prevent us from
influencing our life course, no matter what the external environment is presenting?

The reality in the field of leadership development is that we have yet to offer something that
gets to the heart of sustainable leadership. We realize there is a gap, though leaders themselves
are unsure of what would actually make the difference to them now. Coping, or not coping, in
the meantime is manifesting in, for example, record numbers of leaders leaving their positions.
Those who just move horizontally, while getting a fresh edge, can end up perpetuating their inner
distress as old patterns move with them. Of leaders who stay in their positions, more are
reporting “not feeling confident about making it to retirement”. Increasing numbers of leaders
are being treated for Depression, Anxiety and Addiction, though those around them may never
know about it (Estroff-Marano, 2004). The fast-growing but secret nature of this health concern
has earned it the name “silent epidemic”.

We must admit that just offering more training programs that teach cognitive and
behavioral skills will not be enough to keep the spirit and drive of these individuals alive! Such
intellectual focus will not sustain the leaders we presently have, nor attract new candidates to the
vocation (Charan, 2005). It won’t be enough because, as stated above, leadership is a calling, and
therefore will only be partially supported through cognitive-behavioral skill. Coaching is an
effective approach to helping leaders integrate their knowledge into real-time practice. However, again, there are gaps in even this approach. Coaches are not necessarily available when a leader needs to make an immediate internal shift to “distress” a situation. Neither are coaches often tuned in to, nor prepared to deal with, the intricate dynamics of the person’s psyche – and that is, if the person can even articulate what those dynamics are! The goal now must be to extend all these initiatives so that values, emotions and lifestyle choices can be balanced in. This internal and independent capacity-building of the Personal Leader will deepen and anchor leaders as they move from situation-based knowledge to sustainable life practice.

SHifting how we View and “Grow” Leaders!

Supporting leaders in achieving these benefits will require two commitments. First, there must be an organizational will to shift the cultural mindset about what leadership is, and is not, there to serve. Senior authorities must buy in to this shift, seeing it as part of the organization’s effort to delineate the boundaries of realistic leadership capacity. The goal will be to move from a culture of inappropriate expectation, fear and demand, toward one of appropriate expectation, care and a helping hand. For example, employees in the new culture would accept that a fair leader is more a “skillful mediator” than a “good parent”. Leaders in the new culture would worry less about whether their organization is too top-heavy or too flat. Rather, they would invest more in designing a system that addresses the various levels of necessary and legitimate power. Reciprocity, limit-setting, and consideration of context would be guideposts for resolving conflict, rather than escalating distrust and power upmanship, energies that frequently cumulate in isolated union or employee action. This sorting out of our attitudes about leadership and power will begin to pay off when we observe people being more “curious about” rather than “blaming of” their leaders, more “part of the solution” than “demanding of a solution”! It is in this commitment to support both the task and emotional elements of leading that we most experience the true spirit of “shared leadership”!

The importance of a supportive culture is critical. Without it, leaders will become frustrated and depleted if they are left to, once again, bear the burden for change. Considering the systemic nature of true change, however, those leaders must also be prepared to do their part. This is the second commitment needed for sustainable leadership practice. Leaders will have to stop hanging on to, or demanding from, organizations old “securities” (eg., title designations, secured salaries) which are no longer realistic or workable. Even more personally challenging will be the leader’s courage in facing old internal beliefs, fears and defense patterns that in the end can be their biggest saboteurs!

Formulating a Response That Works!

“Personal Leadership” is the term created by the Leadership for Life Institute to address this need for a more sustainable practice of leadership. Learning how to “grow” one’s internal leader entails a systematic process whereby individuals identify the beliefs, values, emotions and practices which have guided their leadership practice thus far. The growth comes when leaders see where old ways of being and perceiving may be betraying their own present potential, or that
of those around them. The work is then to re-align those beliefs-values-emotions-practices to be able to stay both personally congruent and effective in influencing the situation before them. Let’s take, for example, Helen’s situation where she has always led, since a small girl, with her heart. While this has made her a favorite among many during her growing up years (parents, teachers, friends), as a leader now it is becoming exhausting. If she is willing to learn a new ethic and practice of care, she will have the best chance of using her heart’s desire in ways that preserve that care.

Supporting leaders in sustaining and “living out” this congruence is much like helping them create a piece of art with their lives. It is a reflective action allowing the leader to stay aware of all the things that are happening in a situation, and adjust internally before responding externally. This is where Personal Leadership includes, but goes beyond, basic cognitive-behavioral skill. There is a focus on rightful action because of the social and situational context. It is an ability to think systemically and work with the details. One learns to draw out the common goal in a conflict, and move individuals past resistance and power struggles. The clarity, confidence and wisdom that come from Personal Leadership enables leaders to find the simpler truths in any situation. In turn, they become better able to sustain themselves as they direct their energies toward things that matter and are progressive.

In keeping with this intention, the Institute formulated the following goals and benefits of Personal Leadership services to bring to organizational contacts:

**Benefit #1** - enable leaders to identify where they are personally coming from so as to hold concurrently the limits and goals of their professional role. This clarity will significantly decrease their stress levels as they gain confidence and trust in their ability to stay “okay” even as they meet the complexities before them;

**Benefit #2** – create leaders who, being personally clear, will be better able to discern the expectations coming at them, and respond to what is really being asked. When making complex choices, and keeping their personal orientations in perspective, they will be able to think “out-of-their-box” - instrumental to successful change;

**Benefit #3** - instill in leaders added capacity to positively influence in their personal, family and community roles the very ills they are concerned about.

**MAKING THE CONTACTS:**

In the Institute’s efforts to bring this approach directly to organizations, I was aware of (though still frustrated by) the resistance I met. I often heard comments like, “we’re already doing that”, “we have our own leadership services”. Knowing from reviewing these company services that their understanding of leadership development was very different from mine, I did attempt to persuade these authorities to expand their thinking on the issues. In many cases, the resistance persisted. When I did receive an open door, it seemed mostly because the person I met with had both this reflective and deeper approach to leader preparation, and the power to make necessary decisions.

The actual implementation plan consisted of a phased in process that while collapsing and
dovetailing at times, also allowed for circularity at different points of reassessment. While the final details of the phase-in were customized to fit the individual organizations, the general format was:

Phase 1 - To effect the cultural support needed, a series of meetings were held with the CEO/President and then other cross-departmental leaders. From these meetings, a shared plan was drawn up to make visible the new leadership attitude.

Phase 2 - This consisted of two main formats – one-on-one and group. For the one-on-one, the approach was a longitudinal case-study that the leader undertook with me. For the group, it also began with a one-on-one meeting between group facilitator(s) and the individual leader. Purposes were to open up the topic of Personal Leadership, establish some safety, and begin assessment of what the leaders identified as their personal challenges. Then, a group of not more than ten of those leaders would meet over ten sessions to address a series of guiding questions. Those questions were: What would make a difference to us being able to sustain the heart of our leadership? How do we bring this heart to our everyday leadership activities? As the sessions progressed, there was a focus on barriers to Personal Leadership, with individual goals being explored and support offered.

Phase 3 - This phase was about helping leaders follow through with, and assess, their Personal Leadership goals, over time. Format for such ongoing support was chosen by each individual/group, but often included further one-on-one and group meetings, or planning for an annual retreat. Leaders were shown how to apply their Personal Leadership in family and community roles, and how to keep their leadership vibrant and sustainable over their lifetime.

WHO BENEFITED FROM THIS SUPPORT EXPERIENCE?

1. New leaders being prepared for leadership roles
2. Continuing leaders who were open to a lifelong learning approach to their work
3. Leaders who were burning out from their present roles in leadership

STAMPED URGENT!

I, through the Leadership for Life Institute, have taken here the risk to bring attention to this more human side of leadership development. To sustain my own energy and hope, I have had to be willing to deal with the resistance that came, misguidedly based on the prevailing norm that the private domain of the person’s psyche is off limits. I was prepared to combat such fear with facts on the costs of over-protecting that domain! While I acknowledged that it is essential for leaders and organizations to preserve their autonomy and integrity in the proposed learning, I pointed out that the costs of burnout, silence and depressed cultures is no longer workable. The
reality is that we are in a health crisis! Even people who say they are “coping” are often just over-riding their internal distress signals. The link between role overload, unachievable expectations, loss of hope, and mental/physical/social/spiritual breakdown is well documented (Halowell, 2005; Jacoby & Keinana, 2003; Schwartz & Post, 2002). Canada Health surveys (Gwyther, 1999) report that physicians themselves realize widespread reliance on medication as a way to rid ourselves of our distress is not the answer. These physicians indicate that 50 to 70 percent of patient visits are now due to stress-related illnesses. Insurance companies (Alberta School Employee Benefit Plan, 2003) warn that present benefit plans cannot sustain the costs of this fastest growing cause of disability – psychological distress. Our leaders will be represented in these figures and studies, and will also have to face those who are in such distress.

It is no longer cost-effective or even ethical to continue trying to “train” leaders to work through this quagmire. While lip service is being paid to the need for a more psychosocial approach to general employee support, little innovation has been attempted. Less has been attempted for the special needs of leaders. There is a great deal of confusion about how to actually tackle the problem. We convince ourselves that we “don’t have time”, that there is “no money” to pay for such specialized services. The Personal Leadership approach does not aim to add one more task onto the “to do” list for leaders. It does, however, challenge us all to stop avoiding what we know, making excuses for what we fear. Giving leaders dedicated time to learn to lead well is an investment whose time is now critical!

There is not enough money to accomplish all we want with staff development. Rather than losing more time and energy by arguing for scarce “training” dollars, the challenge is to work at finding the resources to do what we must. Thinking critically, for example, about how “mass” salary or research dollars might be used differently, is a realistic goal. Organizations might also want to re-consider if they are blindly giving over too much of their EAP dollars to external or managed care sources who promise to offer more services to a greater number, but in the end only narrow their ability to deliver what is needed.

Helping leaders, and them helping themselves, to preserve their capacities is a number one health and retention issue in organizational life!! Some tough calls need to be made now, meaning that we must extend our wisdom outside the comfort of packaged learning. While the model of Personal Leadership is structured enough to be easily understood, its strength is in its ability to lead leaders back to why they chose the vocation in the first place. It is socially imperative that we act now to support our institutions and leaders, and that we act with an uncompromising attitude toward the prevailing “I’m doing fine” attitude! Some of us are doing fine; many of us want to be living better!

**MEASURING THE DIFFERENCE**

** The Leadership for Life Institute is committed to preparing and publishing ongoing evidence-based research from this creative learning endeavor. Some data has already been gathered, mainly through case study. Funding is now being sought from a number of government and non-government bodies for larger scale gathering of evidence.
REFERENCES


Badaracco, J.L. (2005). We don’t need another hero. HBR OnPoint (No. BHOL2), 7-12.


