Putting leaders on the couch

When INSEAD Professor Manfred Kets de Vries coaches leadership teams, he effectively puts them on the couch – treating them not so much as rational actors but as emotional ones.

A clinical professor of leadership development, Kets de Vries says “the autocratic leadership style doesn’t work so well any more in a knowledge society.” Organisations are made up of people, he says, and he believes there’s a great deal of truth in the saying, “Fish start to smell from the head.”

“So if the top management creates a toxic environment that will have an effect on the rest of the organisation.”

Instead of just trying to examine and resolve pathological behaviour, Kets de Vries says his aim is to make leadership “a little more effective, maybe more humane, (so that) it might have a positive effect on the organisation.”

“Getting the best out of people, that’s what I try to do really,” he says. “I’m most intrigued by the best companies to work for and what you can do to create better organisations.”

Leadership as a team sport

Rather than coach on a one-to-one basis, Kets de Vries says he prefers group coaching or intervention as he sees leadership as a team sport. “Leadership style in Russia is very different from the leadership styles in Sweden or Singapore. They’re different things but it’s usually a team sport and I think the only important thing is to look at complementarity (of the different roles within a team).”

Along with a 360-degree feedback process, he makes use of a questionnaire which highlights eight different leadership styles. “When you work as a coach with a group of people, what happens is that some of the 600-pound gorillas – which are always somewhere there, particularly in a top executive team – may be discussed and talked about, as opposed to smelling up the place.”

Building trust to break down silos

“It also means you have to build trust and in the process people have a tendency to break down the silos – because particularly at the top management level, people have very silo-oriented behaviour. So people start to understand each other better and virtual teams start to work much better. It’s a very simple thing.”

“If you make this kind of intervention, have constructive conflict resolution, people are more accountable and in the end you get better results. So that’s what I try to do … (and that’s why) according to the feedback, they find it an extremely useful type
of intervention.”

“I want to create a tipping point (to get people to take action). People usually know what they should do. They know they’re micromanagers, conflict-avoiders, abrasive but they don’t do anything about it, because there’s always some pleasure in it,” he says. “I have seen some very significant change take place if you really push people in the right direction.”

**In search of ‘authentizotic’ organisations**

In books such as Coach and Couch and The Leader on the Couch, Kets de Vries suggests that organisations should be, what he calls, ‘authentizotic.’ Based on the Greek words authenteekos (‘authentic’) and zoteekos (‘vital to life’), he says these are organisations in which “you really feel alive” and are a “flag to show these are the best companies to work for.”

Too many organisations, he says, have ‘gulag qualities.’ Leaders nowadays need to realise that ‘the command, control, compartmentalisation organisation is a thing of the past.’ Kets de Vries continues in The Leader on the Couch: ‘To be successful, organisations need leaders who are able to present themselves as they are, who have confidence in combination with humility, and who are viewed by others as having integrity and being worthy of trust.’

Put simply, Kets de Vries says “the role of a leader is to get the best out of people, to really make people feel alive and not become automatons, which is too often the case and that is a waste of one’s life. You have only one life: make it an interesting journey.”

**Narcissism and leadership**

In The Leader on the Couch, Kets de Vries outlines a variety of different character traits or dispositions ranging from the abrasive to the antisocial. He also examines narcissism and leadership, singling out Jean-Marie Messier, the former CEO of Vivendi Universal, who turned a 150-year-old utility group into a ‘glamorous global media and telecommunications giant.’

In the book, Kets de Vries says Messier’s career mirrored the rise and fall of Gordon (‘Greed is good’) Gekko in the movie ‘Wall Street,’ adding that Messier’s ‘flight into grandiosity, vanity, and greed isn’t exceptional in the world of business, except in degree.’

But while narcissism or ‘self-love’ might become a problem if it becomes ‘severe’ or a pathology, narcissism in itself may not be all bad. ‘It’s generally agreed that a certain degree of narcissistic behaviour is essential for leadership success,’ Kets de Vries writes.

“We all need to be somewhat narcissistic,” he says. “It’s good for creativity and leadership. It’s a question of balance. My task is to keep sane people sane in insane places.”