



Leadership today: An inward journey

Executive training may not make a leader out of a follower, but it certainly can make a promising leader better... provided he's willing to put in the effort and take a good long look into his soul.

Three decades ago, the late Mark McCormack, commonly referred to as “the king of sports marketing,” wrote a book called ‘What They Don’t Teach You at Harvard Business School.’ In it, the founder of sports/celebrity marketing conglomerate IMG (with the likes of Arnold Palmer and Tiger Woods in its client roster) explained how working in the business world wasn’t “by the book.” The book spent 21 weeks on the New York Times best-seller list.

Today, the theme could be “What They CAN’T Teach You at Harvard Business School’ (or INSEAD or any other top-ranked business school). And that, according to years of research by two of INSEAD’s leading experts on leadership, is because much of what makes a good leader is not necessarily *bred*, but *born*. And leadership training capitalises on that.

Leadership begins at home

“A lot of leadership skills you learn at home. There is no leadership without a context,” says Professor of Leadership Development and Organisational Change Manfred Kets de Vries, referring to his case study on British entrepreneurial businessman Richard Branson, whose parents were interviewed for the research.

“I once asked Branson if there were any

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entrepreneurs in the family,” Kets de Vries recalls. “He said, ‘We don’t have any entrepreneurs in the family; we come from a family of barristers.’ Then he said, ‘My crazy mother –one mad scheme after another.’ And I met his mother. And I realised that’s where he got his entrepreneurial characteristics.”

It doesn’t have to be a parent it can be a grandparent or uncle or aunt or even a teacher or friend who sees something in the child and supports it. But a good portion of what leadership is all about stems from childhood experiences and the environment in which we grew up.

There’s another type of childhood experience that can define a leader: discouragement. “They have another kind of inner theatre,” says Kets de Vries. “They say ‘I’ll show the bastards. I’ll show them I can do it.’ But even so, there is usually someone somewhere who cares.”

INSEAD Professor of Organisational Behaviour Michael Jarrett concurs. “Leadership success has to do with the way people think, the way they feel, the way they behave. This is more than charisma; this is our “default behaviour”. The way we see ourselves, the way we act...personality is a good indicator of leadership success.”

Jarrett postulates a “bright side” and a “dark side”

to every manager. The “bright side is captured by the five big personality factors: emotional stability, extroversion, openness to experiences, emotional sensitivity, and the degree to which we are conscientious or driven to achieve.” Successful leaders scored high on openness, emotional intelligence and drive. On the dark side, explains Jarrett, “There are psychological fault lines which I would describe as being withdrawn psychologically, having a sense of aggrandizement – everything is all about them – and also micromangement: being obsessive. These are things that we also know lead to poor management.”

Personalities are infectious

Given the above, it should come as no surprise that a leader’s personality affects the workplace and consequently the company’s performance.

“Research suggests that if we have a leader who is positive and outgoing and can see the world as a beautiful place, well this tends to infuse people around them. They become enthusiastic and that leads to high performance,” says Jarrett. “Whereas if leaders come in and say ‘Oh my gosh, I don’t want to be here today, isn’t the world awful?’ and they see the world as very dark...then, hey, guess what happens? This has a direct impact on the team members and on the performance of the organisation.”

Shifts in the global business environment strongly suggest today’s executive is more of a lonesome cowboy than his corporate predecessors. Jobs-for-life are virtually unheard of, as are staff jobs with benefits. Loyalty between employer and employee up and down the corporate ladder is eroding; technology means job skills need to be updated continually, while businesses can be eclipsed practically overnight (remember “My Space”?). You have to manage your own career, and that is changing leadership training.

“In the past, coaching was for people who were dysfunctional. If you were dysfunctional, you were sent to a leadership coach and something would happen, hopefully,” remembers Kets de Vries. “But with the breaking of the psychological contract between organisations and individuals, you have to manage your own career.”

How it all works

Individual executive coaching takes an investment of time (6-12 months) and the desire to change, claims Jarrett. It is not “therapy”, but it does focus on who you are and how to carry out your role effectively within the organisation. “The research suggests that for the right candidate, getting the right coaching approach, it does seem to have an impact. People do change their behaviour and do

have an impact on the organization.”

“Kets de Vries is best-known for his clinical approach to the study of leadership and organisational change (which includes a group approach to executive development at INSEAD). He developed a series of “360-degree” feedback instruments which measures responses and impact up and down the corporate hierarchy, to help leadership coaches better understand – and therefore teach - their executive students. “Everyone is normal until you get to know them better,” says Kets de Vries. “You scratch a little and there comes a whole rich individual out of the group. And each time one of the group makes a presentation, you learn something about yourself, because we’re all narcissists and we say ‘My God, I have the same thing! I thought I was the only one, but he has it too’.”

Groups, says Kets de Vries, are always about the same things – things which occur in the workplace as well as in the executive classroom: rivalry, narcissism, loneliness, the need for belonging. “We have a tendency to fool ourselves,” he opines, “to see ourselves through rose-colored glasses...that’s why I use 360-degree instruments. Simple self-assessment can be a delusional activity due to the desirability factor that makes for a distorted self-image. To receive feedback from others helps people to have a more accurate look at themselves – superiors, subordinates, friends, family members, whatever - to get things on the way.” As the saying goes, “If one person tells you, you have ears like a donkey, ignore it, but if two people tell you so, get yourself a saddle.”

Kets de Vries believes many principles of leadership are very basic (“the leadership style of Alexander the Great and Ghengis Khan have many similarities”), and Jarrett contends that even though today’s business world is more global and more culturally diverse, there are commonalities: having vision, being able to coach, empowering people.

Challenges for the future

What’s different about leadership today is the kind of employees out there in the workplace waiting to be managed. Traditional management texts are aimed at employees in the Western industrialised countries who are typically white males with a high school education, working in traditional manufacturing – car workers, for example. Various think tanks predict that in the next decade that worker will be replaced by the knowledge-based worker.

“It is going to be much more challenging going forward,” agrees Jarrett. “How do we manage creativity? If you think about the creative types, they

are highly independent, self-motivated; they like to have a sense of space, so traditional management methods which might draw on systems and processes are definitely not going to work. What we are going to have to be is much more empowering: have some clarity of what the goal is. How you get there will be down to those individual workers.”

“You need to build trust in the organisation,” claims Kets de Vries. “To set up a database is one thing, but people have to share the information; and you don’t do it if you have no trust. In the end leadership is really all about talent management and culture management. That is what makes the difference in creating the best places to work.”

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