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Leading the Organization of the Future

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Huge and unrealistic expectations are placed on leaders, often resulting in disappointment. This in turn can lead to the perception that, as in Yeats' poem, "the center cannot hold"; trust in leadership is lost and people doubt or cannot even clearly hear the leaders' messages. Unity falls apart, cooperation diminishes or vanishes. Even where clear strategies are communicated, there may be no agreement or fully effective implementation. Great leaders realize they cannot lead in isolation. They surround themselves with good people who support them and each other and bring different ideas and backgrounds. They have a transformational, or coaching, style and look to keep growing themselves as well as actively seeking new ideas and innovation for their firm. Their unified and dynamic leadership group provides a center that does hold and enables a firm to face the exciting and sometimes daunting challenges of our time.

When we think of leadership today, whether in business or politics, one of our favorite poems, W B Yeats' *The Second Coming* comes to mind.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world

In today's uncertain and constantly changing work and social environment, many professional services firms seem to be without direction; they are wallowing in high seas and, to continue the sailing metaphor, the sails cannot catch the fickle wind. People in law are uneasy about the future of their practice, firm, their profession, and even, in many cases,

the future of work as done by human beings.

Huge and unrealistic expectations are placed on leaders, often resulting in disappointment. This in turn can lead to the perception that, as in Yeats' poem, "the center cannot hold"; trust in leadership is lost and people doubt or cannot even clearly hear the leaders' messages. Unity falls apart, cooperation diminishes or vanishes. Even where clear strategies are communicated, there may be no agreement or fully effective implementation.

What kind of leadership is needed in such times? The leader—actually leaders—must form a strong, united, and mutually complementary core. This stable center holds

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the firm securely in its gravitational field and cascades down to all levels of the firm. Leaders provide a compelling vision and gain commitment from their people in the context of that trust and emotional safety, from each other. This network of committed relationships forms a reliable relational environment which consistently stimulates and enables vital neurogenic drivers to do their job. In this safe and sure context, people can withstand and even thrive amid ongoing fluctuations and change.

Our firm, Fortinberry Murray, and we work in an advisory capacity for government agencies as well as multinational corporations and firms. One government agency leader we encountered described the extreme challenges of his team, which deals with global security issues. His direct reports are mostly young, exceptionally talented, and highly qualified. Their work life involves minimal certainty; frequent disruption, and constant travel, often to new destinations, usually at little or no notice; long and unpredictable hours; and frequent danger. Often, they are asked to immediately change roles and priorities as an urgent need crops up. Yet they handle these extreme stressors and remain motivated and committed, and for the most part they enjoy their work. There is a long waiting list to join his team. “How does this happen?”, we asked.

“We have a strong leadership center, consisting of myself and a few of my top people”, he explained. “We rely totally on each other. No matter where we all are in the world, we check in at least daily, whenever possible for Skype or video-phone face-to-face conversations. I not only want to know their conclusions, but also to watch their faces while they walk me through their thinking process, especially

if their view is different to mine, in which case I am ready to change my opinion. We are all constantly learning new things. If a mistake is made, they know I will go to the wall for them and back them completely. I am extremely protective of them, their safety, and their wellbeing. And they, in turn, bring that total dedication to those who report to them.”

With all that has been written about what makes good leadership, you would have to go far to find a better description than the example cited above. But let us break those elements down and understand more deeply why they work and how to achieve them. In this paper, we cover:

- What leadership means to humans;
- What styles of leadership are best for different situations, including the constant change we find ourselves in today;
- What science can tell us about what makes a good, or even great, leader; and
- Leadership in the professional service environment.

What Leadership Means to Humans

Leadership as we know it today is not natural to human beings, which may help explain why there are so few good leaders. Except in times of crisis, hunter-gatherer tribes did not have single leaders (Pennisi, 2014). There were people whose abilities or interest may have led them to take a primary role in certain activities, from hunting to spiritual rituals, but on the whole overall “leadership” was discouraged. When conflicts did arise, perhaps involving competition over mates or relationship squabbles, the elders were trusted to help settle them. Becoming an elder was not a matter of politicking or amassing a

fortune, but simply living until about the age of 35 (Turnbull, 1993).

When Alicia was trekking in the Afghan mountains as a very young woman, she came across a tiny village of stone huts built into the side of a mountain. The villagers had never seen a European before. She and her companions asked, through one of their guides who spoke some English, who the leader was. After much discussion between the guide and several villagers, the answer finally came back: There was a man whom people looked to for questions about their flock and growing corn, and one who took the lead on matters involving contact with other villages and, in very rare cases, the large town on the far away plains. While these people were herders and farmers more than roaming hunter-gatherers, this gives an idea of how unfamiliar our concept of leadership is to those not used to it.

Leadership Styles

Returning to hunter gatherers, in extreme cases, such as when facing natural disasters or when a band got too big and had to split up, individual hunter-gatherers did arise who insisted on certain actions and influenced others to follow, for example: “We need to cross this rapid-flowing river to get to the other side. You trust me, and I am certain we can do this. Yes, there are crocodiles and water snakes, but we must cross now” (Grinde, 2002).

The woman or man urging the band to take the risk of crossing the river is showing a leadership style often referred to as “transactional” or “authoritarian”. It is a kind of “just do it” approach, and it has its place in a one-off crisis. If the leader is trusted, people will turn to him or her for guidance and take certain actions at the time. It is not the style for sustainable change, or for innovation.

Another style is known as “laissez-faire”. The laissez-faire leader largely looks after their people by letting them get on with it, and if necessary making sure they have the resources they need and running interference. This works well with very high-performing teams who are experts at what they do and who may have more specific knowledge or expertise than any one manager. In fact, leadership is often shared among team members, with perhaps certain people taking the lead on specific tasks or when their own area of expertise is a general priority.

The best—in reality, the only effective—leadership style in times when ongoing change and innovation are needed, or when the firm adopts ambitious goals and growth targets, is what is called “transformational leadership”. The transformational leader is affiliative, stimulates discussion and debate, and above all encourages their people to learn, grow, experiment, and develop. This is a very facilitative and coaching style, although the leader does not shirk from making final decisions and taking responsibility for their outcome (Bass and Steidimeier, 1999).

The transformational leader and their executive communicate a clear direction and expectations, giving both authority and accountability for agreed outcomes. With the leader’s support and oversight, people feel safe enough to make sustainable behavioral change, try new approaches, and innovate.

Transformational leadership is predominantly a female style (Eagly, 2013). However, men can become great transformational leaders. Perhaps the greatest of all American CEOs of the 20th Century, Lee Iacocca, was

both male and transformational in his management style (Bass and Riggio, 2006).

Attributes and Capabilities of a Good Leader

Engenders Commitment

More than anything, being a great leader requires the ability to get others invested in the relationship with you. As does almost everything, this of course harks back to the fact that humans are relationship-forming creatures and that 80% of our neurobiology and genetics are geared simply to surround ourselves with a nexus of supportive relationships (Barret-Lennard, 2013). If people feel that they have a strong real—or even a potential—relationship with you, their neurogenetic system will self-organize to follow your lead in order to strengthen that relationship. They will be very disposed to take on your ideas.

This is true even if your propositions are illogical, lack evidence, or even fly in the face of all known facts. Which, of course, goes a long way toward explaining the mass suicide in Georgetown, suicide bombers now, and the Einsatzgruppen during WW2. It is the reason demagogues come into power and sway people to take positions they would not otherwise adopt and actions it would be better if they did not. On the flip side, it is also how great leaders such as Churchill to Gandhi inspired people to overcome their fears, make great sacrifices, and defeat a common enemy.

It is also true that leaders are galvanized by their followers, who become their perceived support network. This is why many politicians will do almost anything to retain power; the fear of losing that support nexus is too strong.

On the other hand, great leaders will develop a strong protectiveness towards their people and, like a parent, a fierce desire for their wellbeing. Every healthy parent knows the protectiveness that sets in with the birth of a child, the overpowering drive to ensure its safety and wellbeing. In functional leaders, a similar transformation takes place when they are put in a position of responsibility for people (Sutton, 2010).

One very good leader of a global law firm that we know and esteem was loved and admired by his firm, which he led for nearly a decade. He was seen as caring, fair, available, and when necessary tough. Even those who felt his decisions went against their personal interests respected him. People felt they could call him if they had a problem, and he would take care of it or ensure it was dealt with appropriately.

This man brought the firm to a position of prominence and financial strength and shepherded it through a very difficult and ambitious global merger with unanimous support from his home firm, something that is rare in such cases. The negotiations were stressful and tough. Just at the peak of his triumph, he suffered a near-fatal stroke. He survived and, shortly after, at the end of his long and successful tenure, left the firm in the hands of a well-prepared successor. In spite of the opinion of his doctors, many of his people did not see his stroke as a coincidence; they felt he had literally given his all for them.

Affiliative

As we have seen, human beings are genetically geared for single leadership only under certain conditions. These are principally in times of perceived danger, when people feel under

attack by forces over which they have no control. Today, with our ever-growing sense of uncertainty and fear, people often feel the need for a parental figure to somehow put things right. This places a great stress on today's leaders.

The uncertainty tends to throw up leaders who are seen as "strong" but not particularly transformational, hence, perhaps, the "imperial CEO". Even law firms have their share of them. The best leadership structure is one in which strong, united groups of leaders such as a board and executive work closely and constructively together (Mier and Giloth, 1993).

In a firm, the job of the board chair, managing partner, or CEO is to facilitate the unity and joint-decision-making capability within the group, largely through nurturing a sense of mutual respect and commitment. The managing partner or CEO is also responsible for his executive members' performance and development in their line areas, and for ensuring that the vision, strategy, and desired culture are agreed and embedded throughout the organization.

This requires an exceptionally affiliative style and the capability to engender commitment in people, unite them under the leader's relationship canopy, and bring out the best in groups and individuals. The affiliative leader enjoys working with people and is stimulated by the exchange of ideas and emotions. They can put aside their own preconceptions long enough to hear the opinions of others and facilitate genuinely generative conversations in which individuals or groups come to new insights and ideas through the exchange (Murray and Fortinberry, 2013).

Behaves with Empathy and Resonance

Much has been written about the need for a "resonant" leader, one who is high in emotional, or better yet, social intelligence: who has empathy and awareness of self and others. Like all other relationship attributes, this ability emanates from the brain's limbic system, which governs trust, safety, and decision making. It is largely essential for a coaching style of leadership.

Empathy is driven by a network of what are called "mirror cells". This unconscious system stimulates us to directly feel what we perceive others feel. An empathetic leader is often able to know others' emotions by tuning into their own. This can be a bit tricky because often we assume that what we are feeling reflects what others are experiencing, when in fact it does not. Accurately assessing what is going on for others requires the self-knowledge to recognize whether the emotion is generated internally—perhaps because it is one of your usual emotional patterns—or is more likely strongly influenced by someone else's experience. It also requires consciously using all your senses to observe signals from the other person—such as shining eyes on the verge of crying, the quivering of lips around the mouth, change in breathing patterns, an alteration in posture, clenching of muscles, or a change in tone of voice.

While empathy is a definite plus for a leader, it must be managed with awareness. Like sympathy, it can be wrongly used or over-used. There is a time for sitting with someone and commiserating, but in the end, the most reliable tool for a leader is showing real and appropriate curiosity about people, and tuning in fully, using all the senses, to what they say.

Resonance is a specific aspect of relationship related to empathy. This is driven by spindle cells, which allow leaders to quickly choose the best way to respond to someone; and oscillators, which synchronize people's physical movements. Examples of the latter are people falling into step, orchestras playing in harmony, and people coming to the same conclusion at the same time. When a group of people share the same "frequency", they experience a strong sense of safety and unison. Great leaders are those whose behaviors powerfully leverage this complex system of brain interconnectedness (Goleman and Boyatzis, 2008). A "resonant" leader is in tune with their people in a very literal sense.

Able to Trust and Be Trusted

We have known leaders whose people felt they had empathy, but for whom they felt little trust. There are several possible causes for this, but we believe the most common is that their followers felt that the leader lacked consistency. They perceived that the leader said one thing to them and then did the opposite, or said something different to someone else, or even that they constantly changed their mind.

Often, this is because the leader lacked confidence in himself/herself. According to research, consistency is so important in human relationships that we prefer someone to be consistently bad than someone who is unpredictable. At least we can build coping mechanisms for the consistent shortfalls of leaders (Bews and Rossouw, 2002).

We know one law leader who is highly respected and whose people regard him with a strong sense of fondness, commitment, and

trust. However, they ruefully recite instances in the past of his showing very little personal empathy, such as forgetting to ask after a close associate's health after they had just recovered from a long illness. Over time, this leader has learned to display concern for his people even when this was not top of mind. Aware of his shortcomings, he surrounds himself with associates who are high in empathy and can remind him to say the right things. He is honest, communicates frequently, keeps confidences, stands by his decisions, assumes the best of people, asks others' opinions and listens respectfully, readily accepts feedback, and admits his own mistakes. If he still has trouble feeling empathy, no one would know it.

Tip: If you don't naturally feel empathy, fake it. Often, this leads to the real feeling developing!

Clear About Needs and Boundaries

One thing the above leader displays is a strong sense of relational and professional boundaries. He is clear about his own relational needs and expectations and those of the firm. A small example of this is that he is well organized and generous with his time, but ends meetings promptly. He does what he says, he will and holds others accountable for doing the same.

With good leaders, people should know where they stand and not have to guess if the leader is pleased or displeased. Feedback should be clear, timely, and forward-looking. If there is a problem with the relationship or quality of work, there should be a discussion to explore reasons and underlying issues and agreements made about different actions going forward. A transformational leader will set or agree expectations and milestones, with regular follow-up discussions to chart progress,

recalibrate, and try out different solutions (Bass and Riggio, 2006).

Willing to Learn and Rely on Others

As well as coaching others, real transformational leaders will look to grow and develop themselves. They will seek feedback and work hard to generate enough trust that people give it. They will also surround themselves with people with different views and backgrounds and expect them to challenge their views. They will facilitate genuinely generative dialogue to stimulate new ideas and innovation, and give them and their people time to think them through.

A transformational leader will aim to create a culture in which it is safe to try new things and fail within clearly set constraints. Does this person sound like an impossible paragon? In many ways, probably. Remember, humans are not genetically geared to be led by any one person, any more than we are geared to live in the complex, fast-changing, fractured global society that we have. Perhaps, one of the most important characteristics of good leaders is they understand this, do not try to project infallibility, and rely appropriately on those around them.

Optimistic and Resilient

This inter-reliance is also key to one of the most crucial of all leadership attributes: a sense of reasonable optimism and resilience (Avolio et al., 2004). Since states of mind are contagious, the leader's optimism is essential to maintaining peoples' willingness to keep putting effort into new and better ways of meeting today's challenges. While Pollyanna-type positivity creates discomfort and skepticism and shuts down honest dialogue, a consistent sense of possibility, enthusiasm,

and affirmation—especially about people—is important for an organization's success and sustainability (D'Intino et al., 2007).

The key to optimism and resilience? You guessed it: surround yourself with people you trust and who meet your most important needs. Every important interaction, and often even seemingly trivial ones, affects the workings of our neurobiology and even our genetics. We display different traits with different people because, to some extent, we are different when we are with them. Our genes express themselves differently, our personalities change, we take on a new persona (Goleman, 2007).

A brain primed with dopamine and oxytocin as the result of praise and demonstrations that the person is valued will work more effectively, engender better emotional and physical health, and drive positive behaviors (Robbinson, 2006). In this context, a person's genetic profile that normally drove, for example, pessimism and strong risk aversion might be modified to allow more upbeat comments and the consideration of new approaches. Ironically, by the way, often the last person in an organization to be overtly praised is the managing partner or leader. We find that frequently when we ask groups who they praised recently. The most hands go up for praising reports, fewer are raised in relation to colleagues, and very few people raise their hands when it comes to their leaders. Those who do raise their hands seem hesitant and sometimes sheepish.

"Praise?" exclaimed one managing partner in a break from a session we were facilitating for law leaders. "The barista downstairs gets more praise than any of us. We just get the blame!" His companions nodded appreciatively.

This is a pity, since the dopamine effect of praise is to make the brain work faster, more clearly, and more creatively—just what you want a leader's brain to do! Therefore, it seems to us that a leader should role-model asking for, and at the very least graciously receiving, praise.

Are Good Leaders Born or Taught?

Recent research suggests that the desire to be a leader is about 40% genetic. Though this is slightly truer of men than women (leadership has a 44% genetic factor for men and 37% for women), overall the drive for leadership seems to be highly heritable. At first, it was thought that this might just be children trying to be like their parents, but a number of recent intergenerational and twin studies have disproved this notion (Chaturvedi et al., 2012). This does not necessarily show that good leadership is genetic; although all of the traits, and some of the skills, associated with good leadership have a strong genetic component (Dawes et al., 2013). The traits of effective leadership such as optimism, decisiveness, breadth of vision, and so forth all have a genetic base.

The genetic predisposition to lead seems simply to govern the desire to take that role, perhaps galvanized by opportunities or a strong need within the tribe. Having the will or need to be the final decision maker will perhaps cause people to step up to or seek out the position. But unless that is paired with the right inherited characteristics and learned skills, particularly those required by the situation and organization or team, the leadership will be flawed and can even be detrimental to the firm.

Leadership in a Professional Service Environment

A good leader is a good leader no matter what the organization. However, professional

service leaders face particular environments and challenges. Much is made of the fact that, particularly in most legal partnerships, the organizational structure is fairly flat, and in many law firms crucial decisions must have a large degree of consensus. This certainly can inhibit decisions that need to be made quickly in a crisis or in periods of rapid change. However, any really good leadership requires the ability to get buy-in from people in order for strategic initiatives to be implemented and for lasting change to occur. Organizations governed by executive fiat tend to be disempowered and static.

Leadership has historically been underappreciated in professional service firms. First of all, most of their leaders did not rise to the position solely on the basis of their ability to galvanize and develop others; in almost all cases, they had to first be successful in the craft and business of their profession. In some cases, this produces an environment in which the leaders are those who were successful professionals, but not necessarily good managers.

People tend to revert to the success strategy that got them where they are. For a lawyer, this might be great attention to detail, and an innate pessimism as to the motivations of others coupled with a focus on the mistakes in what people are saying or doing. However, these characteristics and skills are not what an inspiring leader needs (Boyatzis, 2011). Any negativity or narrow focus of today's leaders and managers will impact not only the people and culture of today but, through lack of inspiring role models, the leadership of the future.

Second, in many firms, especially mid-size ones, there is still a deep distrust of management itself. There is sometimes pressure for all partners (even, in some cases, the managing partner) to stay “on the tools” and bring in income, no matter what their management responsibilities are. Managers are constantly required to justify their very position in addition to how well they do in it. “For all the respect I get, my job might just as well be shoveling manure around here”, one rather disenchanted and fatigued head of a large global practice group once said to us.

One of the problems is that leadership is not seen as a career in professional service firms. Many managing partners and CEOs in these firms also feel that the top positions are more an end to their career than a rung on a ladder. “No one outside of accountancy really believes accountancy firms need managing”, one told us. “They somehow seem to think that, unlike employees elsewhere, accountants just get on with it themselves. So I do not think I can find a position in another type of organization. Plus, there are very few firms looking for top leaders at a specific time, and when they do, they prefer to promote internal people who are known and know the culture.” This can be a disincentive for relatively young professionals, who may be eager to try out new ways of doing things, to seek leadership positions.

Summary

Great leaders realize they cannot lead in isolation. They surround themselves with good people who support them and each other and bring different ideas and backgrounds. They have a transformational, or coaching, style and look to keep growing themselves as well

as actively seeking new ideas and innovation for their firm. Their unified and dynamic leadership group provides a center that does hold and enables a firm to face the exciting and sometimes daunting challenges of our time. ☺

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