

BEING A LEADER

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What you do as a business leader is very important. How you do things as a business leader is critical. But I reckon when it comes to effectiveness and fulfilment in exercising leadership there is something far more fundamental than both of these: Who are you Being?

If you are looking for the new frontier in leadership thinking or the latest edge in leadership practice I believe it lies in the domain of Being. Otto Scharmer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology argues that this “source of action” is the great “blind spot” of modern business leaders. He argues that Being is so determinant of success that two managers can engage in exactly the same action and get completely different results depending on “who they are being” when they take the action.

The first time I went to University, during my well spent youth, I studied philosophy and read big fat tomes by Heidegger on “Being and Time” and Sartre on “Being and Nothingness”. It started a lifelong casual flirtation with existentialism and ontology – to be honest an intense Catholic upbringing actually started the ontology bit but I sometimes leave that out of the story! In more recent times I have continued my fascination with the question of Being through an attraction to Eastern Philosophy and the practices of mindfulness and meditation. In particular, I am interested in how they might contribute to the practice of business leadership.

A lot of Eastern Philosophy suggests that we can be more effective and fulfilled in general if we put less emphasis on doing and more

focus on being. Some existentialist philosophers have argued that our thinking is often back -to -front when it comes to how the world truly works. Often we think and act as if we need to Have certain things in order to Do certain things which will allow us to Be a certain way (have an MBA so I can do financial spreadsheets and then I will be successful). But perhaps the real trick is to Be a certain way which will lead us to Act accordingly and will Get us results which are consistent with both (be cooperative and hence put more effort in with your colleagues which will result in having a better team).

When I work with senior managers I ask them to recall a time when they were at their best at work and leadership was very fulfilling for them, and then I ask them to describe what they were like at this time. People come up with all sorts of answers – inspired, relaxed, bold, adventurous, humorous, creative, decisive – and then I ask them why they aren't like that all the time (or at least more often) at work and in their leadership. Well it is obvious to us why we are not like that all the time – events and circumstances and how we react to them get in the way!

But is this obvious answer really true? Do external events and circumstances actually have the power to determine how we are? It certainly seems that way often and to many of us. But what if such appearances are not reality? What if this is a case of Sartre's "bad faith" where we conspire with each other and events and circumstances to pretend that we human beings do not have a radical freedom to be and to choose? Maybe to exercise leadership is to continue to be certain ways which are powerful and valuable to others in the face of current events and circumstances!

Let me give you a simple example. I worked recently with a highly valued senior manager who juggled four different job titles at his SME and who was also engaged on various boards in his provincial community. Indeed he was miffed because he had just been informed that one of his four job responsibilities was to be taken from him. During the above exercise he realized that he rarely had much fun at work or in certain significant relationships – he was much too busy and stressed and important to have fun. Yet he had once been a very fun person! And he realized that like many other people it was when he was relaxed and having fun at work that he was most effective and most influential with others. He wondered when he had bought the lie that the pressures of senior leadership meant that he couldn't be fun too.

Speaking of which, wouldn't it be funny if the domain of Being is the new frontier in leadership thinking and practice? After all it is only a few thousand years ago that the Greek philosophers pioneered the new field of ontology or the study of being and it is only a few millennia ago that Eastern teachers and philosophers developed the art of mindfulness. Maybe good ideas and practices never lose their currency!