

DRIVING MISS CRAZY

Richard Searle www.searleburke.com r.searle@mbs.edu

Senior managers are always driving. It is the most common metaphor that I hear them use. They are always driving down costs and driving up profits, driving improvements in performance and driving through change, driving down cycle times and driving out variations. Clearly it is important for managers to have drive!

But when it comes to the need for creativity “driving” doesn’t cut it – just as you cannot command people to collaborate, you can’t drive creativity and innovation. And it is lack of creativity, particularly creativity about the future that causes managers to drive their companies over cliffs, into brick walls and up cul de sacs. Ansett was a spectacular example - Nokia seems a likely candidate currently.

Leadership helps people to act adaptively now in order to deal with present day problems and to create a preferred future. At a systems level, my colleagues Rob Burke and Sohail Inayatullah have contributed a lot to the field of “futures thinking” and have developed a whole range of sophisticated tools to help corporate leaders engage in the creation of plausible and preferred futures for their organisations.

On the field of action adaptive challenges require leaders to deal with issues where we don’t have a solution and where we must create and innovate new solutions in the process of resolving them. It is my experience that leaders can help individuals and groups to be creative not by “driving them” but by helping them to “let go”. To tweak the dominant metaphor further, the problem is in our

suspension system! Adaptive challenges invariably require collective creativity and the essential prerequisite for this is “suspension of judgement”. Humans are incredibly judgemental – groups of humans are a heaving mass of judgements of each other, and the causes of problems and how to solve them .

When I work through a process of leadership dialogue with groups of senior managers and finally I get them to slow down and to be more honest with each other they regularly admit to all this judging and to all the defensive manoeuvres they are making to avoid the judgements of others. If typical group interaction and organisational behaviour has anything to do with “driving” then it is often like one big “defensive driving” course rather than something purposeful and creative. In fact all this judgemental behaviour and “dodgem cars” reactivity actually drives out creativity.

Perhaps surprisingly, I have found that many very senior managers are most judgemental and critical of themselves. Many are far more critical of themselves than anyone else could ever be. It seems to me that it is not the actual judgements of others that closes them down and makes them defensive in groups, it is the fact that others’ judgements trigger their own internal “Judge Judy”. This is why suspending judgement and listening deeply, and encouraging others to suspend judgement is such a powerful leadership act in relationships and groups. It frees people up to be present and creative!

When individuals and groups can become more mindful and turn down all that loud judging, interpreting, opinion making, analysis and evaluation, as well as all the anxiety and cynicism, they finally can start to hear their individual and collective intuition. Intuition is

critical to creativity but it speaks to us very quietly! It is amazing to observe groups of hard-nosed business managers make this transition – suddenly they become very calm and playful, they laugh a lot, and some of their speaking and writing becomes almost poetic! This is the leader as artist. Now they have a chance of being creative in dealing with their leadership challenges.

Tapping into this intuition and creative capacity is incredibly valuable also for individual leaders and our career prospects. When you think about it, it takes only two or three really bright, intuitive ideas by an individual to build an entire lifetime career. Too bad that some of us are so busy “driving” ourselves and everybody else that we cannot even elicit a couple of creative ideas in a lifetime!