LEADERS AND THE STOCKHOLM SYNDROME

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Some environments bring the best out of people and draw them into committed action. And some don't.

Every January I holiday in the hinterland behind Lorne on the Great Ocean Road in Victoria. I stay on wonderful Otway farmland and make the twenty minute trip each day through glorious forests to one of the most beautiful stretches of beach in the world. Every year I love the place just a little bit more.

Within minutes of arriving at our holiday farmhouse I am a different person. I relax deeply. I feel connected to nature profoundly. I have a sense of coming home to myself. My morning meditations are very still. My reflective diary from these stays is brimming with inspiration, and gratitude, and passion and commitment for the year ahead. The natural environment and its natural beauty draw all that out of me.

Beautiful human built environments can influence me the same way. Florence and Venice can work the same magic. Watching the Geelong Cats play their sublime brand of football has had a similar effect on me! Being in the presence of some individuals and operating in some organisational environments also have big effects on me. Occasionally I come across organisations where I can tell quickly that they are switched on and high performing, partly because I am so switched on and stretched by them myself.

During the early stages of our senior leadership programs we tell participants that we do not intend to teach leadership to them in any conventional or predictable sense. What we intend to do is create an environment which maximizes the chances of them learning some new and valuable things about leadership that will make a big difference. A lot of the focus of our leadership development is on the environment.

Effective and fulfilled leaders do not rely on circumstances or the right environment in order to act and be influential. If that was a prerequisite for leadership then very little would ever get done. Even good organisations are imperfect, and some organisations are not that good. I have written often about not waiting until all your ducks are lined up in a row to start exercising your leadership (See my previous articles "Being a Leader" and "Leadership and Happiness").

Some of the public leaders whom we admire the most such as Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi or Martin Luther King, have emerged from and operated in very constricted and hostile environments which they have refused to let dominate them. Their own philosophies, values and belief systems, along with their warrior spirits, have refused to bend to the dominant culture. Malcolm Gladwell in his latest book *David and Goliath* suggests that "disagreeableness" is a characteristic of many successful leaders. Aung San Suu Kyi complains that many folks now want to sanctify her and put her up on a pedestal where she will not bother anyone with terrestrial activities such as politics and community activism which actually have a chance of changing things for the better.

In one of those apparent paradoxes of leadership, it is also part of the work of leaders to build environments which empower and motivate both others and themselves. All those great public leaders have operated within very dedicated groups where the support and inspiration has been mutual. At the end of our leadership programs we urge managers to get into action quickly when they return to their organisations – create space for themselves so they can be different before the old environment puts them in the same coffins they occupied when they left. In our eyes some senior managers are suffering from the Stockholm Syndrome – they have become comfortable with being hostage to organisational environments which are complacent about and to varying degrees hostile to leadership, change, fulfilment and success. Those organisations prefer the same old ineffective leadership or middling performance or uncreative and transactional culture, not because they admire them but because they are so familiar.

Occasionally, a few of our participating managers will not accept our advice on the need to create an environment which calls forth their leadership. They

believe that they can sustain their own changes and personal transformations in splendid isolation from the organisations in which they operate. They do not fully grasp the "symbiotic and dialectic" relationship between the individual and the group which I have described previously in my article "Leadership which Transforms Groups and Organisations". And they cannot understand why their uplifting feelings and good intentions quickly wither on the vine back on the job.

Fortunately most senior managers accept our advice and they get busy in their organisations building environments which draw out their leadership and enable their contribution and the contribution of others to flourish. Many go back and they share a lot about their insights, values, individual and collective purposes, and new commitments. They actively cultivate allies who will support their different approaches to leadership and the business. Often they will encourage their allies to attend our leadership program too. They find confidantes for themselves within the company and from outside the organisation including from their leadership program cohort. They conduct forums and seminars with their colleagues and try to influence them in new ways of doing things and new ways to be creative and innovative about the future.

The smart managers will put a lot of effort into building teamwork with their own executive team and their management teams. Sometimes they will invite us into their organisation to work with their teams on strategy, teamwork and performance. If they are not the boss they give a lot of attention to trying to influence the boss. Sometimes they and others see the boss as the major problem and they seek lots of advice and coaching from us and others on how to influence the major authority figure. They will reflect on the advice they received on the leadership program when they were consulted over one of their current and important adaptive leadership challenges. Then they will go back and try to crack their strategic challenge and use their success to build their own and their colleagues' confidence in their new found leadership capability. The more ambitious leaders set about changing the whole culture in their organisation or at least their part of the organisation. This sometimes involves inviting us or others into the organisation to conduct customised

leadership development or cultural change programs for significant numbers of their senior leaders.

These change agents will always link their leadership initiatives to the overarching strategic goals and performance goals of the company or organisation.   Leadership and cultural initiatives also can wither on the vine if they are treated in isolation from these factors. Of course one of the reasons for creating a leadership culture in the first place is to ensure that the best strategy emerges - the wrong strategy can kill any company – and that the strategy is implemented. Effective leaders will also realize that the organisational environment consists not only of people and culture, but processes and systems, technologies and structures, resources and staffing, customers and investors. One of my colleagues Mark Rehn uses a bean bag throwing competition to illustrate this point. He organises two teams whose job it is to throw a number of beanbags into a sweet spot marked out in the distance. Unknown to the participants the bean bags have very different weights and their flight performance through the air diverges wildly. Just improving people, or throwing technique or teamwork is not enough to result in a reliable competitive advantage in this exercise. The variability in the process needs to be removed first, such as all the members of the team throwing the same preferred beanbag each time, in order to get the best performance and to guarantee satisfied throwers who are inspired to continue playing the game.

Sometimes the way forward may be a staffing solution. Simply removing one person, one black hole, from a team may achieve overnight what a range of team building initiatives on their own cannot achieve. Or maybe the way forward is a structural solution – those two merged entities simply don't fit together and all the great leadership work is not enough to compensate for it.

But effective leaders also know that no amount of technical solutions will build a winning environment. Each time they get rebuffed or experience a setback they remind themselves that there are many ways to peel an apple. These shapers of the environment don't stop connecting with others, building relationships, influencing change and sharing their creative insights and their leadership insights, and in the process they keep discovering afresh their own purpose and internal resources for being a leader.