

LEADERSHIP ON TOP: A GUIDEBOOK

This is a Guide Book for how managers and others can become leaders. But it is a funny type of Guide because it doesn't look like a typical "How To" book – it doesn't contain lots of tips and it doesn't provide a step by step path which guarantees a defined outcome.

This is more like a guide book for someone who wants to climb to the top of the world's tallest mountain. This advice may have been used by others to assist their climb up that slope. The guide book may be able to describe what the views and the experiences are like as you take the climb and reveal methods and pathways which have worked for others. But now we are talking about you and your climb. Different people are challenged by different aspects of the leadership project. And unfortunately, there have been earthquakes and avalanches since the last successful trip so we will still need to do some work to find the best path to the top for your ascent.

The title "Leadership on Top" is itself a little tongue in cheek – I hoped to create just enough sexual tension in the title to turn this into a best seller. There are lots of programs and books out there with titles like "Leadership at the Top" and "Leadership at the Peak", and this guide is not much like them. Actually this guide takes a distributive view of leadership. The focus is strongly on the work of leadership rather than on the most senior authority figure with the title Leader. "Leadership On Top" refers to the cream-like nature of leadership. In a bottle of milk the cream naturally rises to the top. Sadly, it is not the case that those at the top in organizations and who have the title leader are necessarily the cream of the crop. But I believe that the natural capacity and passion of many people to exercise leadership will rise to the top if it is liberated, encouraged and appropriately developed.

I have spent twenty years working as a management educator and engaging with thousands of senior managers and hundreds of organizations. I am a long time faculty member and now associate of Melbourne Business School - Mt Eliza

Executive Education which is a global leader in the provision of management education. More recently I have joined with other terrific collaborators in operating our own management education consultancy called Leaders & Searle. Along with these excellent colleagues I have designed many senior leadership programs and developed our own learning method called “Leadership Insight Dialogue”. For the past decade I was Program Director for the flagship senior leadership program at MBS-MTE called “Leading for Strategic Success”, and more recently I have developed the “Essential Leader Program for Senior Leaders” conducted inside companies by Leaders & Searle. I have conducted large-scale leadership development initiatives for MBS-MTE inside Top 100 companies such as AXA Asia Pacific and Transurban. More than 1500 senior managers from Australia and the Asia Pacific region have undertaken extensive leadership development work with me, and large numbers of others have engaged in shorter corporate workshops, and this Guide Book owes more to their insights and experiences than it does to my own.

Through my lengthy interaction with these senior managers and with their organizations I have become increasingly more optimistic about leaders and about the role of leadership. It seems to me that human beings and human organizations have an intrinsic ability to be adaptive, cooperative and inventive – but it requires the exercise of leadership to bring this out and to overcome our more destructive and less attractive tendencies. I believe that this should be the focus of leadership work in modern organizations: Change, Collaboration and Creativity. I refer to them as the 3Cs. Organizations, and society more generally, need to address the 3Cs right now so we can avoid the other big C: Crisis.

The collection of articles which follows was written over a six year period. The original ten articles were published by the Business Spectator magazine. The prime purpose of the earlier articles was to assist participant managers of our leadership programs to reflect on aspects of the development work which they had undertaken with us and to apply the learning in their workplaces and lives. The content and processes used on our leadership programs are high-impact and they are designed to demonstrate both intellectually and experientially how leadership can transform individuals, groups and organizations. These articles

were written to help participant managers to reflect on that experience, to reinforce their insights into the nature of leadership and themselves as a leader, and to support their efforts to apply our approaches back in their own organizations.

My confidence in the value for you contained in these articles is not based on my own talents. I am far more modest now about my own contribution than I was twenty years ago when I first started this work. I have discovered that in leadership it is best not to take yourself too seriously and it is best to be a little irreverent. But I have had the privilege to explore these ideas and methods with a very large number of extremely talented senior leaders. I have learnt from them what works and what does not work in leadership. Together, we have debated these ideas, applied these ideas in practice, and refined ever more powerful processes for demonstrating and sharing the insights. Now you have the opportunity to benefit from our collective hard work.

Often, companies and organisations invite me to spend just a day or two with their senior leaders sharing the punch lines from our work. This is not as powerful or rigorous as engaging in a full development process but it still has benefits. I have surprised myself with where I now begin these shorter sessions. I usually commence by discussing the centrality of insight and reflection to the practice of leadership. Where do insights come from? How do you get from insight to change?

Here is my brief overview of this learning and change process and the articles that follow explore these elements in much more detail. It seems to me that the process of learning and change for leaders starts with exposure to new or fresh ideas, and new or fresh experiences. Leaders actively seek these out, although some of them are available to us every day if we are willing to open our eyes and our minds. In truth, you can engage in lots of new work assignments, read lots of books, do lots of courses, and it still can have very little impact on your leadership. Sometimes it is just an information dump. Learning only starts to happen once you have some personal insight from all these events. How do you convert these events into insight? The practices of Reflection and Mindfulness are

the methods for gaining insight. Reflection is a thinking process and mindfulness is an awareness process. I often tell senior managers that if you want to be a good leader become more reflective and if you want to be a great leader become mindful. But you can be guru-like with your insight and still no change occurs. To transform insight into beneficial change you need to Act on your insights. If you act you may achieve a temporary impact but the risk remains that you will return to the previous equilibrium. This “reversal to type” is an extremely common and demoralizing experience for all of us including those who aspire to leadership. To achieve sustained beneficial change you need to continue to act on your insights until you have developed a new Habit. Nothing that I have said here is rocket science, but nor is it common sense or common practice.

Take the practice of Reflection. In the articles that follow you will find lots of advice about reflection. One of the things which I always tell senior managers is that I have a million dollar idea for them which I am willing to give away very cheaply – keep a reflective diary. On my courses everyone does keep a reflective diary and we structure lengthy reflection sessions where folks can share their insights with the group. This is generally one of the richest experiences on our programs. Senior managers rave about its effectiveness and many commit to keeping up the simple practice when they return to the workplace. Some benefit greatly by keeping their commitment and others struggle with it. How can this be? How can a smart senior manager be intellectually and experientially convinced of the benefit of a simple and inexpensive new practice and they don't persist with it? We can all understand this phenomenon. A sensible diet is a simple way to improve our health but many of us ignore that too. Simple doesn't mean easy until you have done the work of turning it into a new habit. Effective leaders do not need to learn the same old things and make the same old mistakes endlessly, because they follow through with the whole process of change until it sticks. Transformation can seem like a trite word to those who are not familiar enough with its power and its benefits.

If you want to get the most value for yourself from the following articles I recommend that you choose to suspend any assumption that you already know what leadership is and what it looks like. Come and explore it afresh. Leadership

may not have as much to do with authority or technique or glamour as is commonly portrayed. It may have more to do with work and courage and improvisation. Maybe we sometimes confuse leadership with our ego which just loves to control things, while it projects and protects itself. Leadership, on the other hand, may have more to do with contributing to others and to changing things for the better. Leadership may just happen to be one of the most demanding and fulfilling activities going around.

The ideas contained in the following articles are drawn from many great scholars, and I acknowledge them throughout my pieces. But the insights are drawn from the reflections and practices of thousands of senior managers and from my own reflective diaries. Throughout the collection I will quote the thoughts on leadership of some of the senior managers who have worked with me. Some people with weak stomachs start to gag when I use the word “journey” – those confected TV reality shows have a lot to answer for – but I am going to use it anyway: May these articles enrich your own leadership journey. But do not be misled by this notion of a journey – what is described in these articles is not a linear process and you do not need to be linear either in how you choose to read the articles. My real hope is that you will keep returning to them to find illumination and inspiration.