

# THE RELATIONAL DILEMMA OF LEADERSHIP

---

**By Richard Searle, November, 2010**

[www.searleburke.com](http://www.searleburke.com) r.searle@mbs.edu

Many modern leaders in business and organisations don't know where to locate ourselves. I am not referring to our accommodation needs but rather where to locate ourselves in relation to the groups and organisations which we lead. Having worked with hundreds if not thousands of CEOs and Senior Managers I reckon that many of us get this wrong. If you are struggling for an example, think Kevin Rudd!

The most common practice among the manager leaders with whom I work is to join the other manager leaders in the company and place ourselves above our people. We conform to an us-and-them pressure from both groups, it supposedly protects our authority ("how can I be hard on someone if I am too friendly," we say) and it is personally less vulnerable. But my experience is that it is not the most effective and fulfilling way to lead.

The other very popular practice is to place ourselves out in front of our followers and hope that our charisma and inspiration will somehow suck the group in a preferred direction. The flaw is in confusing authority and leadership and the cost is separation and disconnection. In part it is "lonely at the top" because we isolate ourselves!

Russell Crowe in the movie "Master and Commander" moved effortlessly between both locations. It is two or three hundred years ago and Russell is captain of a British navy ship. He is very

charismatic – first over the side of the boat and he has put his bayonet in twenty of the enemy before any of his crew has disembarked. He tells the funniest jokes around the meal table with his officers. He has this soft side too and retires to his own quarters to play the violin. But if any of the sailors acts disrespectfully towards an officer, Russell has him roped and lashed a hundred times.

I remember a CEO from a Perth company telling me that Crowe in that role was his inspiration. “My managers expect me to make decisions,” he told me, “and anyway I can’t rely on them.” Later when I interviewed his general managers they described him as a “know it all” and they themselves were pretty jaded. It may have worked in the navy a few hundred years ago but is it really the model for modern organisations?

Just recently I worked with the CEO of a very successful energy retailer who confided that in the past year he had lost himself in the job. Initially he had built a strong entrepreneurial leadership team and he had worked well with the Board and his Chairman. He prided himself on his own humility despite his significant commercial successes. But he felt wounded a year earlier after setbacks over the future direction of the company, and he had started to distance himself from his other managers and he found himself in a tug-of-war with the Chairman. What shocked the CEO was that this had all happened without him truly realising it and despite his background dissatisfaction.

I reckon that the most effective and fulfilling way to lead is to locate ourselves within the group we lead. I remember working with a Chief Operating Officer and his management team from a top fifty Australian company. The team greatly respected the COO but there was a distance between him and them and he always had the last

word on any topic. Six months later I saw a much tighter and yet more creative team. The COO would actually absent himself from some discussions so that he didn't "cramp their creative juices". The managers talked about their new practice of deputising for the COO at some Board meetings and "taking some bullets" for him in order to protect him more!

Long distance leadership denies a basic truth – we are influential through connectedness. Not only is it more fulfilling for everyone concerned for us to be more relational in our leadership, but that connectedness is the conduit for the creativity and innovation that is lacking in many businesses.