

THE BIG AND SMALL OF LEADERSHIP

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With a twist on what others have said before me I reckon that when it comes to leadership there is “nothing as practical as a practical theory”. At the same time, and with due debt to what others have said before me about customer service, I believe that the exercise of leadership actually comes down to hundreds of “leadership moments” in the day of senior managers.

Before you start thinking that I am being a bit “high fallutin” by talking about theories of leadership, I reckon that most of us already have at least fragments of a theory which guides our actions. For many of us our guiding theory of leadership has been absorbed from conventional and traditional thinking within our culture and organisations, and from our observations of supposed role models. The problem is that I think that many of these “theories” are incomplete, misleading or less than fully useful.

Some of the popular working theories on leadership which I encounter on a daily basis in businesses include: the military theory of the strategic leader who stands on the highest hill and issues directives from this privileged vantage point to the massed armies below ; the heroic and glorious individual who is constantly rising above the pack; the warrior king who cuts a swathe through the forest so the others can follow; the humble philosopher king who was born to rule; the technocrat who can think a way through any challenge and; the cunning street urchin who outmanoeuvres all the

smarty pants (think Lindsay Fox, maybe Richard Branson, maybe John Howard).

Personally I am attracted to the theory developed by others that leadership in modern organisations is about getting ourselves and others to take responsibility for adapting in order to survive and thrive. For my money, any good working theory of leadership needs to address at least six factors: the diagnostic need to understand what our current leadership challenges are; the distinction between the more technical authority-based managerial role and the work of leadership; the source of our leadership effectiveness which goes beyond what we do and how we do it and lies in who we are being; the need to move others to change and to sustain that change; the need to get people to work really well together and to bring out the best in people and; the need to be creative and innovative to shape the future.

But let's not get too grandiose about this leadership stuff – while we are being grandiose we can miss the hundreds of moments of leadership truth which present themselves to us each day. On the field of action leadership can look as humble (and dangerous) as, for instance, saying what needs to be said that nobody else is saying. In my work with many senior managers I have asked what leadership looks like on the field of action to them, and here are some of their answers:

- listening deeply
- not providing easy answers
- being personally vulnerable
- acknowledging and appreciating others
- reflecting and be mindful
- taking some personal risks

- showing courage to be unpopular at times
- being still enough to tap into creativity and intuition
- providing space for others to lead
- opening up small cracks or possibilities for the future

For a long time whenever we asked our MBA students who they saw as their leadership role model, they overwhelmingly nominated Jack Welch the darling of Harvard Business School and former CEO of General Electric. Does that mean that Jack is the answer to our riddle? Probably not – senior executives rarely mention him - could be that even leadership is subject to the fashion of the day!