LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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Leading Responsibly Through Change: Fix the System, not the People

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On the CAL 2018/19 theme of 'Leading through Change'

Part One of this *Leadership Insight* explored the importance of fostering creative conflict. It argued that meaningful change depends on small initiatives from everyone and extolled the virtue of developing individual character and capability to lead through change. Yet this also has its limitations as decades of social psychology research reveals that people tend to over-rate the importance of their own character. This *Leadership Insight* therefore broadens the discussion to explore the importance of those we spend time with, and the context in which we operate. Put another way, this paper highlights the need for responsible leaders to focus beyond their own qualities and to recognise they do not operate in a vacuum.

Idea 2: Orientate yourself outwards

All organisations, like all organisms in nature, must adapt to changes in their environment or die. So, in a complex and changing world it is vital that leaders are outward looking. Even so, all too often organisations and leaders become gradually cut off from the realities of the outside world, not sensing or understanding changes in the external context. By nature, and design most organisations are insular: their reward and promotion mechanisms, working environments, and rules and regulations are all self-centred. In such places the way to get ahead is to be a political animal, deliver on internal projects and build a strong network within the organisation. These deep structural incentives over time subtly (but powerfully) drive conformity, narrow outlook and limit our ability to reflect critically on what we see around us. This hints at a dark side to the work of organisations to create shared values and a common culture – with employers increasingly demanding not only their employee's time and skills, but also their mind and heart. The consequences are dire, for, as William Deresiewicz argued in a speech at West Point, this leads talented people to become 'excellent sheep', formed 'in environments where what is rewarded above all is conformity', 'world-class hoop jumpers' who 'think about how to get things done, but not whether they're worth doing in the first place.'

This process of institutionalisation can become exaggerated when work colleagues become friends. Professor Herminia Ibarra argues that we are all 'narcissistic' (drawn to people like us) and 'lazy' (we like people who are easy to get to know because we can see them easily). Organisations can make this situation worse if they expect employees to be routinely present – or on call via email – for increasingly large parts of the waking day. So-called 'enlightened' employers often pride themselves on the social facilities and activities they make available to employees, and they are even more proud if they extend the invitation to spend social time at the workplace to their friends and families too. But this all puts pressure on people to fold their social and work lives together to progress in their careers. The consequence is that we tend to start living in 'echo chambers' populated by those who sound and think like us and so who limit who we know and reinforce what and how we think. Indeed, President Obama said his in final Presidential Address: 'over time we become so secure in our bubbles that we start accepting only information, whether it's true or not, that fits our opinion.'

Loss of perspective is a particular challenge for the Army: it grows its own leaders, has a very strong culture and its people spend a career in one organisation. How different would the Army be if this was not the case? What would the impact be if a significant number of its people had, as a norm, a colourful range of knowledge, skills and experience gained from outside the Army? Responsible leaders, understand the homogeneity of their lives and actively

broaden the diversity of those around them. Leaders must put themselves and their teams in meaningful contact with people who think differently, see the world differently, and inhabit different 'bubbles' with exciting new networks. They must seek out people who will be far more challenging of assumed ideas and practices, who will look at things with fresh eyes and not as easily fall back on the "things aren't done that way" response to new ideas. Such initiatives may require some courage to establish, but have the potential to transform how we think and act.

Idea 3: To really lead change, fix the system

The power of the organisation around us to shape how we think and act also draws us to the final idea: Leading through change demands focus not just on our own behaviour (and that of those around us) but also on organisational culture together with the processes and policies that shape it. We are all heavily influenced by the system of which we are part. Research suggests that even when people tend towards the right behaviours, a poor organisational environment will often lead them towards doing the wrong thing. In our work at the Forward Institute we meet people almost every day who are forced to work in outdated systems that squash their power and diminish their creativity. Even the most exceptional ideas stand little chance against institutional dysfunction.

Successful change, therefore, demands that leaders understand how behaviours are affected by a system and fix design flaws that lead to negative influences. This is the approach of the air industry; it reacts to an accident (or a near-accident) not by simply trying to scapegoat an individual, but by trying to redesign the aircraft and its supporting systems to decrease the potential for pilot or engineer error. To give another example, a traditional response to the challenge of cultural issues is to train people about the benefits of diversity and, even though we can do little to alter our preconceptions, the unconscious bias we all have. How much more effective would it be to instead change the system by, for example, removing the names, academic institutions and birth dates from CVs when recruiting people? You can't be unconsciously biased if you don't have anything to be unconsciously biased against.

So, what does this mean for leaders in the Army? When trying to change something, look first at what effects the system and environment are driving, then work out what and how that might be changed. It is the leader's role to ensure that structures and incentives are in tune with any behaviour they want to change. Emmajane Varley, one of the Forward Institute Fellows at HSBC, has developed a simple rule of thumb as she works on changing culture at the bank: no solutions that try to 'fix' people. Instead we suggest these three practices:

- Human error is a symptom of trouble deeper inside the system, but the psychological instinct is to blame individuals. So, build the observation skills and habit to notice errors in the system and when something goes wrong, really focus on the root cause.
- Start at the bottom. Leaders should start with those who are closest to the problem in an attempt be best identify the root cause of issues. Why? Because they are the ones who must navigate the system and are forced to create workarounds when faced with unrealistic expectations or contradictory instructions and incentives.
- Challenge superiors and speak up about what you find. Let your senior leaders know when what you are being asked to do is in opposition to what the system encourages you to do, but be proactive in identifying solutions.

In summary, cultural resistance to change runs deep. However, the need to proactively engage with it, given the potential rewards, is great. True lasting change requires a more responsible form of leadership: leaders that take responsibility and nurture 'creative conflict'; leaders that value difference, orientate themselves outwards and listen to uncomfortable voices; and leaders that use their power to influence the systems that significantly shape all our behaviour, for better or worse.

Questions:
- Are you in a bubble? How broad is your network? Who do you spend time talking to?
- How can you broaden your perspectives? How good are you at truly listening when you spend time with someone who is from a different world?
- Do the rules and processes around you at work bring out the best in people? Which parts of the system stand in the way of people behaving the way you want them to?

Further Reading:
- William Deresiewicz, *Solitude and Leadership* – a speech given at West Point and published in *American Scholar (2010)*
- Max Bazerman, *Becoming a First-Class Noticer, Harvard Business Review (2014)*

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