

Chapter 6.

The Nature of Breakthrough Leaders

For the past six years we have been conducting research into breakthrough leadership, looking at the process as well as the nature of the leaders themselves. What is extraordinary about the breakthrough leaders that were identified was not how exceptional they were, but in many ways how ordinary they were. The surprising thing that emerges from this research is how normal their behaviours are, and how much they are the behaviours of people who basically care deeply about others. They are not just the behaviours of people in leadership positions. Often the behaviours described can also be applied to colleagues or team mates. In fact, in some companies that were studied, people struggled to think of any leaders who inspired them, but found it much easier to think of examples when the field was broadened out to include other people they had worked with in their careers who had inspired them.

Even in the case of identified leaders, few stood out in any way as being remarkable. Not many were described as being exceptional. Most breakthrough leaders were unassuming, humble leaders who did not fully comprehend the impact that they had had. They were aware of the results in terms of outcomes for the follower, but in many cases they had not fully appreciated the deep personal impact they had at the time.

Interestingly, Teresa Amabile from Harvard Business School, found something similar when she looked at how leaders influence creativity. Amabile reports that:

“We often assume that leadership, especially charismatic leadership, plays a central role in spurring creativity and innovation. But there is little empirical basis for this belief. The researchers were struck by the professional ways in which a manager’s ordinary routine interactions with subordinates can support – or undermine creativity. We found that what these leaders said or did led team members to feel either more or less supported by the leader. That perceived level of leader support seemed to influence creative work down the road. Most of the successful leaders didn’t by their own behaviours inspire creative ideas ... they didn’t present some lightning bolt idea ... there was a process whereby seemingly trivial behaviours that leaders engaged in on a day to day basis would have a profound indirect influence.”¹

Leaders who inspire come from all walks of life, at all stages in a career and at all levels in the organisation. What we found to be consistent was that they were accessible to their followers and able to challenge old ways of thinking and they were able to do this by engaging in the behaviours as described.

The research looked into the behaviour of breakthrough leaders and uncovered certain characteristics that go to the heart of the breakthrough interaction. In many ways the inspiration that comes from breakthrough leaders is as much about the “who” of the leader as it is the “what” he or she does.

The attributes of breakthrough leaders are:

1. Treats others with respect
2. Builds trust
3. Are optimistic
4. Team oriented
5. Clearly committed to learning
6. An excellent communicator
7. Personally involved
8. Passionate about a cause

Whether it is the context that influences the nature of the leaders and brings out these attributes, or it is the nature of the leader and the attributes which drive the context or situation is uncertain. It is not clear in which order they come, what it is more certain is that there is a dynamic interaction of nature and context which delivers a truly remarkable result.

1. Breakthrough leaders treated others with respect.

These leaders showed a deep respect for others. They didn't tell them what to do although they certainly challenged. They didn't demand compliance although they were resolute in their belief in the other person. They showed respect primarily by taking the time, and through their body language they displayed what we call engaged listening. By this we mean listening that makes it obvious that one is involved. It's more than active listening, where one is attentive and receptive and perhaps uses what counsellors refer to as “minimal encouragers to talk”.

Engaged listening makes it obvious that you are there to share the journey with the other person. Questions that are asked have a twofold purpose. They are designed to create greater understanding and empathy on behalf of the questioner, but also intended to help the other person to think more clearly and to articulate more fully.

These leaders accept people as they find them and respect them for who they are. What they are concerned to uncover are impediments to the development of each person's potential, especially impediments which stem from a mindset which precludes each individual from seeking opportunities and challenges.

When people are in relationships of respect, they feel more valued and, as a consequence, more open in their communication. They are more open in two ways: more open with others and more open to others. That is, they are more candid in what they say and, in a reciprocal way, more open to be influenced by what others say.

2. Breakthrough leaders build trust.

It became apparent in this research that breakthrough leaders had the ability to build high levels of trust. This ability to build trust stems from two factors:

1. The leaders were rated high in personal integrity which was defined as keeping confidences, following through on commitments made, keeping promises and being honest in their dealings.

2. They were rated high on the absence of personal or hidden agendas. People felt they knew where they stood, they felt that the only agenda was their own development and not what was necessarily in the leader's best interests. In other words, these leaders would be prepared to put forward a person for promotion or let them move to another team in order to further their development, even if it left a gap in the leader's own team.

Trust in any organisation is critical for knowledge sharing and is at the heart of collaboration. Putting it simply, knowledge will never be shared above the level of trust that is established. In relationships where there is low trust, people are careful about what they disclose. When there is high trust, people will be more revealing, even in areas which might cause embarrassment or

criticism.

High trust in a team leads to candid discussion and to frank feedback, but this is only productive where there is shared vision and a high degree of respect. High trust in a relationship builds confidence and leads both parties to be more open with each other. Leaders build trust because of who they are, as much as what they do. Breakthrough leaders build trust because their agendas are clear and because they make a genuine investment in the potential of their followers.

3. Breakthrough leaders are optimistic.

Breakthrough leaders are more optimistic in their assessments of the potential of their followers, and their capability to meet greater challenges. They were not always seen to be optimistic in regard to their own lives, but they certainly were when working with another's development. In other words, even those leaders who were more pessimistic by nature did not allow this to cloud their beliefs about the other's potential. They were able to bring a professional style to their work through their interactions and give the other person a greater sense of control of their own destiny. They do this by expanding their followers' options and choices and by building their belief in what is possible.

It is impossible to inspire someone through pessimism, through highlighting all the reasons why someone can't be successful. No coach can build self belief in a team by concentrating on the impediments to victory and the hopelessness of the task. Irrespective of how he or she feels, a coach whilst being realistic about the obstacles, but must clearly be confident about the team's ability to succeed.

Martin Seligman, a psychologist and global leader in research into the power of optimism and the debilitating effect of pessimism and learned helplessness, explains it this way:

“An optimistic explanatory style stops helplessness, whereas pessimistic explanatory style spreads helplessness. Your way of explaining events to yourself determines how helpless you become, or how energised, when you encounter everyday setbacks ... what is crucial is what you think when you fail, using the power of “non-negative thinking”. Changing the destructive things you say to yourself when you experience the setbacks that life deals all

of us is the central skill of optimism.”²

An effective breakthrough leader helps people to put things into perspective, to challenge their negative self talk and helps each individual to build a more optimistic and positive view about his or her future. They do this through their interactions, through their support and through their belief that each of us always has greater potential which can be developed and further challenges that can still be met.

4. Breakthrough leaders are team players.

These leaders believe in the power of the team. Even those who are more introverted by nature still believe in the collective power of the team and want to contribute in their own way to a greater team result. It’s a matter of team spirit and the perspective that all individual efforts come together to build success. These leaders have the belief that each individual’s work has significance and that when each person develops his or her potential, it has the power to lift the performance of the whole team.

This idea of connectedness also extends to the company vision and mission. These leaders have the belief that each individual’s work contributes to the overall company strategy and that each person should set goals and aspirations that one to one lift the company towards its vision.

Michael Dell credits this philosophy with playing a large part in the Dell company’s spectacular success. He puts it this way:

“Whether you’re hiring someone in an entry-level position or to run one of your largest groups, that person must be completely in sync with the company’s philosophy and objectives. If the person thinks in a way that’s compatible with your company’s values and beliefs he will not only work hard to fulfil his immediate goals, but he will also contribute to the greater goals of the organisation ... my goal has always been to make sure that everyone at Dell feels that they are part of something great – something special.”

Michael Dell describes the teamwork he is looking for at Dell as a real partnership where people are open with each other and take a mutual interest in each others’ development. He says that:

“This kind of teamwork suggests a different way of building a company together. It’s not about people staying out of each others way, or working hard to be competitive but not political. It’s about people who are thoroughly invested in each others’ growth.”³

Sustaining commitment to any significant change process is also much easier in a team. A solo effort to change takes enormous reserves of willpower and self discipline and can falter as the person tires or as stress builds up. Being a member of a cohesive team is a great source of strength. Teams can provide the passion and the energy which builds the resilience required to see change through. When one person stumbles the others can provide support, when one person has a bad day the others can quickly put it into a bigger perspective.

Teams when they work effectively can also utilise the diverse skills found in any group of people. They provide a great context for development. If they are performance focussed they can lift the achievement threshold for all members and because they can invariably perform better than any group of individuals they can be a great source of pride. The diversity of skills and the performance focus means that they can provide the environment for innovation and original thought which enriches not only the team and the company but each individual member as well.

5. Breakthrough leaders are committed to learning.

These leaders have a passion for learning, for finding a better way, for challenging the status quo. They were often depicted as curious with an insatiable desire to learn.

During more stable and predictable times, the ability to learn was not such a competitive advantage. Leaders in their interactions with others were more likely to stress those things which didn’t change and had a greater focus on consistency of effort and standardisation of process. In the world of today with ramped up competition and high speed change, the need to build greater capability faster and with shorter lead times across the business is paramount.

Leaders need to break through resistance to change. This not only becomes a competitive necessity, but also a personal survival priority. As the nature of the competition changes and boosts in individual and team performance are demanded, those who cannot respond will be left behind.

Every time there is a shift in competitive strategy and every time new technology disrupts established capabilities, there is a resultant sea-change in skills, attitudes and responsibilities required by large sections of the workforce. The ability to change, to quickly build capability and to work in new ways is a basic requirement of long term employment in most, if not all, industry sectors.

Leaders at the personal level play a huge role in creating a context for change and a climate for learning. Jack Welch was an advocate for leaders to be learners and challenged them to:

“Make your organisation a learning organisation. The biggest competitive advantage that a company can have is creating an environment where people can learn from each other. You have to have an insatiable desire to learn.”⁴

6. Breakthrough leaders have excellent communication skills.

It is not breath taking oratory that is called for, or the motivational skills of the charismatic leader that is needed but the sincerity of the leader with a deep commitment to the development of others. These things undoubtedly have impact but it is an impact that soon fades if not followed up. It soon fades because the excitement of the moment is quickly replaced by the harsh light of reality once a sceptical mindset gets to work. No matter how excited a person gets, if in their heart of hearts they don't believe they can do it, then motivation soon fades.

Sporting coaches soon realise that motivational talks have little effect in the context of the game. It's the game plan, the skills training, the specific challenge on the field that is important and enduring. Rather than revving players up, most coaches are trying to calm them down so they can concentrate on the task at hand. It's about harnessing emotion and expressing it intelligently and about countering negative thought patterns. A good coach knows how to blend the right amount of challenge and support.

In a business context it is similar. The highly effective leader can blend the right amount of I.Q. and E.Q. (emotional intelligence). The I.Q. is about logic, about making the business case, about explaining what it is that the person needs to do. The E.Q. is about being in touch with the person's emotional reaction, understanding their motivational drivers and appreciating the personal dimension of each challenge set. The effective leader blends I.Q.

and E.Q. in presenting the opportunity as well as recognising fears and anxieties, and can work in both the cognitive and affective domains. Sometimes the challenge requires more logic, sometimes more empathy. Sometimes the person requires more convincing and other times more understanding.

The effective leader also uses a repertoire of communication approaches, each one with a specific style, each one to serve a specific purpose. The styles (refer Figure 3.) range from simply creating awareness through to building learning capability.

Awareness. The leader who is just trying to create awareness simply restricts the interaction at this stage, to informing, to highlighting issues, to bringing things to another's attention. Often they would think of this stage as "sowing seeds".

Understanding. The leader who is trying to build understanding will use a more interactive exchange where there is room for questions and answers from all parties involved. This stage is designed to build acceptance of the need for change.

Agreement. The leader who is trying to formulate an agreement will hear all perspectives, will engage in greater discussion and will try to develop a shared explanatory framework. This stage is intended to develop shared priorities for change.

Commitment. The leader who is trying to generate commitment will draw others into building the case for change, encourage their contribution and explore ways to give them ownership of the change process. This stage is for gaining endorsement of the change.

Disciplined action. The leader who wants action understands that to turn commitment into a disciplined plan of action, requires the establishment of specific objects and appropriate measures as criteria for success. This stage is to put discipline and structure into the change.

Learning. The leader who promotes learning will assume the role of a mentor or facilitator and seek not only lessons learned, but also to embed changes into the established processes and procedures. These leaders rely more on the power of review and reflection as the catalysts of change.

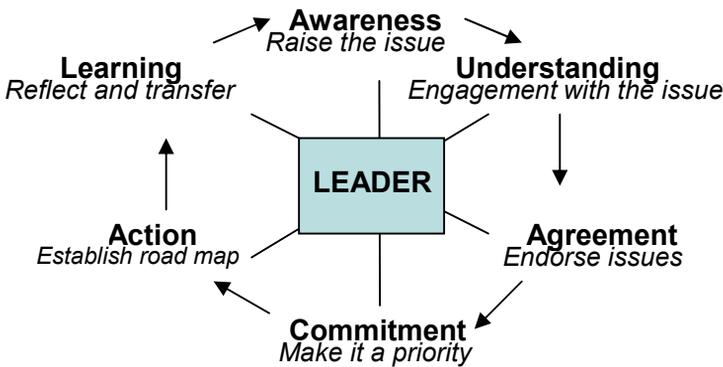


Figure 3. Communication Levels

7. Breakthrough leaders are personally involved.

The major complaint about most leaders, especially during change, is that they are neither visible nor accessible. Leaders are always busy with many competing demands for their time but they cannot have impact unless people see them and can spend time with them.

Leaders have three constituent groups in their immediate sphere of influence that they need to be personally involved with. They will have a boss, a group of peers and direct reports. If they wish to influence the business agenda or the strategic direction of their company, they need to be able to manage up. If they wish to help the company be more integrated or better coordinated, they need to influence in a more collegial sense. Both of these groups require some time and some strategic thought. However, it is the last of the three, the direct reports, who need the greatest personal involvement.

The success of the company in large part is driven more down the line than up the line. The cascading effect is a real multiplier effect and bringing the vision and strategy to the front line is where it is realised and where the rubber really hits the road. It is breakthrough leaders at all levels who are the architects of this process. It is these leaders who realise the potential one at a time, situation by situation. It is not a generic task, it is deeply personal and cannot be fulfilled without considerable involvement between the leader and each individual.

Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman from the Gallup Organisation put it well when they write that:

“Companies are searching for undiscovered reserves of value. Human nature is one of those last, vast reserves of value. If they are to increase their value, companies know that they must tap these reserves. You, the manager, are the best mechanism they have.”⁵

In other words, the challenge for leaders is more about psychology than business strategy. It is more interpersonal than operational. It is for astute leaders to find the best mechanisms for bringing out the best in individuals. It is an individual task, one to one, and very personal, to find out how to make each person more fulfilled, more effective and further developed than they were before.

8. Breakthrough leaders have a passion for a cause.

The best leaders are passionate about what they do. For them it is more than a job, it is a chance to achieve something worthwhile. They are motivated by the desire to make a difference, to make a mark, to leave an imprint. They look for the opportunity to go beyond just what is required to complete the task. They bring a considerable discretionary effort to their work, beyond simple motivation and beyond just enthusiasm. They have a deep sense of engagement with what they do and are driven by a strong sense of purpose which brings great clarity to the choices they make on a daily basis.

This deep motivation is something that Daniel Goleman identified as the hallmark of the new leadership style.

“If there is one trait that virtually all effective leaders have, it is motivation. They are driven to and achieve beyond expectations – their own and everyone else’s. Plenty of people are motivated by external factors such as a big salary. By contrast those with leadership potential are motivated by a deeply embedded desire to achieve for the sake of achievements. The first sign is a passion for the work itself.”⁶

It is hard to inspire others if you are bored and frustrated. In short, it is hard to inspire others if you are not inspired yourself. It is certainly impossible if you are bitter, resentful and cynical. Leaders with negative

emotions such as these certainly have an impact on the people they lead, but it is a negative effect. They suck the life out of enthusiasm and take the drive out of ambition. Leaders who are cynical have given up trying and they have shut down on learning. Cynicism is the direct enemy of learning, because once you are cynical you believe there is no point in learning and in trying to change things for the better.

Such leaders have a contagious effect and can quickly kill all hope of improvement. In a similar way, leaders with positive emotions are equally infectious. They spread enthusiasm and hope. They create climates of opportunity and innovation. They do this best when they are working for a cause in which they truly believe.

We can probably all recall teachers through our school years who were passionate about the subjects they taught. Many of the stories that participants recounted about inspirational leaders, were stories about these teachers. They recalled the energy they created through their passion and about the lasting motivational effect this passion had on the lives of their students.

Daniel Goleman and his team, have been researching resonant leadership, which they describe as the ability leaders have to deeply touch their followers and to motivate them in a profound way. They write:

“These leaders articulate where a group is going, but not how it will get there and setting people free to innovate, experiment and take calculated risks. Knowing the big picture and how a given job fits in gives people clarity. Visionary leaders help people to see how their work fits into the big picture, and give people a sense that what they do matters. This maximises buy in for the organisation’s overall long-term goals and strategy.”⁷

An important part of the transformational process is the energy these leaders bring. They can literally change the lives of their followers by connecting them to a larger cause and by showing them how, through their work, they are making a difference to the lives of others. People will bring considerably more discretionary effort to a cause than to a job. To this end it is the ability of leaders to describe their organisation’s vision and mission in worthwhile terms that brings a daily sense of purpose to the work of their teams.

There is no doubt that the breakthrough leaders described in this research were excellent leaders. They were excellent because of the impact they had on their followers, not because they were exceptional human beings. It was the combination of characteristics and specific behaviours which produced the result. Whilst the behaviours can be learnt by deliberate practice, the characteristics are more intrinsically tied up with the character of the leader and his or her values.

Having said that, a leadership propensity can be nurtured and developed and cultivated and built as a leadership strength. Treating others with respect and building trust are leadership attributes. Being optimistic and having a commitment to learning are also assets to leadership. Being a team player, an excellent communicator, personally involved and passionate about a cause were also defined as key attributes in this research. It is probable that without these attributes at least to some degree one would struggle to be a leader. This research suggests that it is the extent to which these are developed which may define the success of the breakthrough leader.

¹ Amabile, T.M., How Leaders Influence Creativity, Harvard Management Update, Article Reprint No. U0312D, 2003

² Seligman, M.E.P., Learned Optimism, Random House, Sydney, 1994

³ Dell, M., Direct from Dell, Harper Business, New York, 1999

⁴ Welch, J., Winning, Harper Business, London, 2005

⁵ Buckingham, M. & Coffman, C., First, Break all the Rules, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1999

⁶ Goleman, D., What Makes A Leader? Harvard Business Review, Vol.76, No.6, November-December 1998

⁷ Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R. & McKee, A., Primal Leadership: The Hidden Driver of Great Performance, Harvard Business Review, Vol.79, No.11, December 2001, Pg.42-51