

Leading from Not Knowing



CHRIS LONSDALE & ASSOCIATES LTD.

Leading from Not Knowing

as

a leader you may well have come across a paradox that is at once challenging and, in some ways, illuminating. The paradox is that, quite simply, leaders are expected (by themselves and others) to know everything. Or, at least, everything related to the challenges of the organization that they are leading. Of course, being human, you know that you can't possibly know everything, and you can't possibly always have all the right answers for the challenges faced by your organization.

This paradox leads us to consider the question of leadership. It's an old question, but one which seems to need continual revisiting in the face of rapid changes in the world.

So, the old question posed once again – What exactly is leadership? What, really, are leaders expected to do? In this short article I want to suggest an interesting answer to the paradox – the idea of leading from NOT Knowing.

“Shoulds” versus “Cans”

If you get any group of leaders in a room and ask them whether or not they have answers to all the big problems they face, they'll say that they don't. At the same time, many feel that they should have answers to those problems.

One person that I coach told me a story recently. His friend, “Bill”, ended up with a new boss. On the first day in her new role, the boss called “Bill” into her room and gave him the new rules that he was to operate under. She told him, in effect, that she knows everything that is going on in the organization, that he should respect that, and that he should follow everything that she said to him.

Bill, of course, questioned this. He dared to suggest that, on occasion, maybe his boss didn't know everything. She grudgingly acknowledged this, but then said, quite adamantly, “You never let anyone know that you don't know something”.

The response of this leader is not uncommon. In a business world often filled with bravado, and the need to use “spin” in order to survive, feeling that one must be seen to have all the answers seems natural. Yet, if you look at what's at stake for the survival of most organizations today, is this “natural” response good enough? By that I mean does it really have any evolutionary value in terms of helping an organization to change and grow so as to stay competitive?

Consider for a moment how the world has changed in the last fifty years or so. It once might have been possible for a leader to know



Leading from Not Knowing

all that mattered in relation to his or her business. Today, however, things are very different. New scientific advances are happening every day, and each discovery creates the potential for discontinuous change. The Internet really is creating a revolution. Today, working from home, one person can achieve what would have taken a small army and millions of dollars just a generation ago.

With a laptop computer you can connect with most sources of information in the world. New ideas are immediately available, and value is captured by those who can use these ideas quickly and flexibly to offer a new product or service. You can video-conference with someone on the other side of the world just using a free service, and for a little bit of money you can improve the quality of those connections. I could go on, but you get the picture. The rules have changed, and they will continue to change.

Which leads us to a fundamentally important question, or two. In this day and age, with the speed of change and the continual development of new knowledge, can a leader ever hope to know everything? More importantly, is there any real value in the leader “knowing everything”?

Can a Leader Know Everything?

Let’s address these questions in turn. Firstly, can a leader hope to know everything? In an environment where the future is going to be very much the same as the past, it’s likely that a leader can know everything that matters. He (or she) will have seen things before, and having acted appropriately in the past will

know how to respond in the face of a familiar situation.

However, where the future is likely to be very different from the past, reliance on experience – especially the experience of just one individual - can be a liability. To prepare for the future, you need to be able to predict future scenarios based on a range of different knowledge sources. These sources are often so broad, and so complex, that it isn’t possible for one individual to master them all.

To effectively make use of all these different sources of information, a leader needs to draw on the experience and views of many different individuals to create a synthesis. Leadership takes place, and the organization makes the correct decisions. However, this doesn’t happen because the leader has all the answers. Rather, it happens because of the combination of knowledge from many sources.

A side effect is that learning happens – for the leader and for others. Through working with others who are expert in their own areas, everyone involved in the process deepens their knowledge base.

There is, of course, an entirely different angle to this question as well. The issue of “filters”.

Each of us only knows things that have come into our minds. We do not know things that have not yet been able to penetrate the mists of our unconscious. And, it can be clearly demonstrated that we filter out or distort information through our senses all the time.

What we think we see or hear really isn’t. Like that dead body that you saw on the road one night, the hairs standing up on your neck, until you got close enough to realize that it was only a piece of an old tire.



Leading from Not Knowing

It seems to me that one of the really important aspects of wisdom is to realize that one doesn't know anything. Each of us has a view, based on the information that we have been able to perceive. Of course, the information may be incomplete, and there may be totally different ways to interpret the information that we have been able to perceive. Therefore, to be truly effective, it is important to be able to draw upon the perspectives and conclusions of others in order to build a more complete understanding of a situation, and thereby to be able to act more effectively.

Should a Leader Know Everything?

This second question is probably more profound than the first. People who work for modern organizations are very different from their counterparts a century ago.

A hundred years ago, leaders did the thinking and workers implemented the action. Today's workers are, by and large, knowledge workers. This means that their job involves learning, understanding problems, and solving those problems. Much of the "action" is done using machinery and technology. And, much of today's productive output is in the form of documents – encapsulated knowledge.

If a leader tries to solve every problem himself, he is basically taking people's jobs away from them. The end result is a demotivated team, and an overworked leader. So, one has to

argue that not knowing is a better state for a leader than knowing. This does not mean that a leader doesn't know anything, but it does mean that the leader recognizes the limits of personal knowledge, and is prepared to use the intelligence and knowledge of others in a way that adds to everybody's understanding.

Taking the idea of filters another step forward, of course, we get to explore an entirely different angle to this question as well. If it isn't possible to know everything, or even to perceive everything fully, then getting input and multiple viewpoints is going to be critical to any decision making process. If, however, a leader acts as though he has perfect vision and perfect understanding, the end result will be the withdrawal of support by those who could at least help to create greater depth and clarity around any situation.



Leading from Not Knowing

The Basis of Modern Leadership

If leadership in the modern organization can't come from knowing the answers to everything, then what is the basis for leadership? In many ways, the answer is a simple one. Every group of people needs some way of coordinating action. A way of acting in concert. This is the function of leadership. At the most basic level, the leader of any organization needs to make sure that the group being led has a clear focus and a clear goal. The leader's role is to create focus and coherence.

Secondly, the leader needs to make sure that the organization is asking good questions. By good questions, I mean questions which, when answered, will provide strategic guidance for the organization. These questions are not easy, and the good ones frequently emerge from intense interaction between many different people working for an organization.

Thirdly, the leader needs to ensure that the right people are brought together, and that they work effectively together to generate good answers to the questions being asked today, and those that will be asked in future.

All three of these roles of leadership require that a leader deeply understands people and group process. To be truly effective, a leader must understand how people think, how they communicate, and how they can work together most effectively so as to leverage the different knowledge and resources that each person brings to a situation.

It's a simple idea, but profound in it's

consequences. It means that, in order to be successful, modern leaders need to think about bringing the best out of their people, so they can truly perform. This is not purely an academic exercise. It is a rigorous search for tools and techniques that help people fully leverage their strengths, individually and in groups.

This is the art of facilitation which, in itself, is a full time job. That doesn't leave much time for the leader to know the answers to all the other questions that still need to be addressed.

This shouldn't matter, of course, because the leader will be acting in a way that ensures the right questions are being addressed using the minds of the people brought together for that purpose. The leader will be "Leading from Not Knowing".

Leader as Facilitator

As a facilitator, what must a leader do? Clearly, there are many different types of facilitation technique. I shall not go into those here, but rather will focus on the essence of what is required from a leader.

Be Vulnerable

From the position of being a leader, probably the most powerful thing that one can do is to be vulnerable. There is something about vulnerability that communicates, not weakness, but strength. And people respond to this strength.

Recently I was speaking to a successful young businessman who has been able to turn



Leading from Not Knowing

around an ailing company. Three years ago he took over a company that was hemorrhaging money, and was about to collapse. The turnaround began with the implementation of rigorous financial discipline in the company. Shortly after, the focus turned to marketing and rethinking the focus of the company.

At the same time, everybody's energy was focused on maintaining relationships with key customers and leveraging the real strength of the company – the ability to identify customer needs and work flexibly to meet those needs faster, and with higher quality, than any other competitors.

Despite all these efforts, and signs that the company was headed in the right direction, there were periods when there was no money. Instead of hiding it, this leader stood in front of all the staff in the company, and told them about the situation. He shared the financial position of the company. He shared his passionate belief in the ability of this company to prosper. He shared his fears about what could go wrong. And he shared that there was no cash to pay anybody this month, or next month, but that it was his intent that they would get paid when the company came out of the hole.

As a direct consequence of these actions, people in the company committed themselves to ensuring the survival of the company. And they succeeded. Along the way they also forged a culture where everybody gets involved in thinking about the future, and the role of the leader is more one of “holding the space” than of giving directions.

Share the Problem; State the Unknowns

A second element that a leader needs to consider when leading from not knowing is to “share the problem”. This means that the leader, either alone or with help, ensures that critical problems of the organization come to be named, and then shared. In this way, more brains get to be focused on solving the problems. In the example above, this was one of the clear steps taken by the leader. Once everyone knew the problem, and knew that they were being asked to help solve it, they stepped up to do so.

As part of sharing the problem, the leader needs to state what is NOT known. This is especially important today where most value is added by solving problems that others have not yet solved. By stating what is NOT known, the leader focuses the energy of the organization on finding answers to what, one would hope, are important questions.

Task the Team

Thirdly, the leader must give the people in the organization the task of both identifying directions for solving problems and then of coming up with the solutions to those problems. If an organization is always waiting for the leader to give specific direction, and specific solutions, then the leader becomes the bottleneck. The only way for an organization to perform at the levels needed in today's competitive marketplace is for “parallel processing” to take place. This means



Leading from Not Knowing

that solutions are being created every day in every corner of an organization. This is a process that a leader cannot control. Rather, it is a situation where one puts some guidelines in place, focuses the energy in a certain direction, and then lights the fuse. When done well, this creates magic.

Communicate a Sense of Hope

Maybe more important than all the other steps above is the simple step of creating hope. Imagine for a moment that you were a sailor on one of the ships that brought Christopher Columbus to the new world. You had been at sea for weeks, and you felt as sick as everyone else looked. You were going somewhere that nobody believed existed. And, in your mind, the only end was your own death. In that situation, what would stop you from leading a mutiny and killing the captain? Probably, just one word. Hope.

The leader, above all, needs to keep faith that a solution CAN BE FOUND. It is such hope that keeps a team of people focused and energized. Without such hope, especially in the dark days, all will crumble. Often, it is just the steadfast belief of a leader in the vision and in the organization that pulls more than a rabbit out of a very old hat. And therein lies the mystery and the magic of leadership.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it's maybe fair to say that a leader doesn't need to know everything.

And, you do need to know something. You need to know how to lead. This knowledge is probably not something that you find in books, but books can help to the extent they share the experience of those who have gone before. I would state that the true prerequisite to great leadership is a deep self knowledge. Because, this self knowledge can give you the courage and the clarity to accept who you are, while at the same time accepting others. And, when you add to this just a little bit of hope, you create the conditions for others to serve in ways that will amaze. ●

What's next?

We live in a complex world, where many different perspectives are of value. In light of this, this article is intended to share a particular viewpoint only. I would hope that you would have different ideas and perspectives, that would help to extend the debate on the topic of "what is leadership".

Your comments are valued. If you have comments or thoughts related to the topic in this article, please visit and post your thoughts into the comments section on the website. We'll either post them on the web, or include them in future editions of our newsletter.

To access other articles or information about this or related topics, please visit us at www.chrislonsdale.com.

