In Praise of the Incomplete Leader

Today's offering aims to do a bit of myth-busting about leadership - and hopefully help sustain the benefit you just got (or plan to get) from your summer break in the process!

Professors Ancona, Malone, Orlikowski and Peter Senge are no slouches when it comes to understanding effective leadership. The MIT Sloan School of Management, where they ply their trade is a world leader in the subject. So when they co-wrote In Praise of the Incomplete Leader in the Harvard Business Review (February 2007) it was worth paying attention;

It's time to end the myth of the complete leader: the flawless person at the top who's got it all figured out. In fact the sooner leaders stop trying to be all things to all people, the better off their organisations will be.

Their research ranged through Apple, Intel, Citibank, Nike and eBay to the emergence of a new post-apartheid South Africa;

In today's world the executive's job is no longer to command and control but to cultivate and coordinate the actions of others at all levels of the organisation. Only when leaders come to see themselves as incomplete - as having both strengths and weaknesses - will they be able to make up for their missing skills by relying on others.

The MIT research leads the authors to say that the myth of the complete leader makes many leaders exhaust themselves, fearing they will be seen as incompetent if they can't master, or seem to master, all the requirements of complete leadership. Does this sound familiar?

We have probably all worked in organisations with "my way or no way" leaders. Typical symptoms are to nurture and promote only those who think their way, and intolerance of difference and challenge. The warning from the MIT team is clear;

Leaders who choose only people who mirror themselves are likely to find their organisations tilting in one direction, missing one or more essential capabilities needed to survive in a changing, complex world

So there is a dual danger. Firstly people end up personally exhausted, and doing precisely what they feared in the first place - appearing incompetent. Secondly they damage their organisations in the process.

Are you shifting uneasily in your seat? Please read on despite your instinct to delete this e-mail and immediately unsubscribe from Think Piece. It's an uncomfortable moment, but there is good news ahead!

As a response to their findings the MIT team developed a model of distributed leadership, viewing leadership as a set of 4 capabilities;

- Sense-making (understanding the context in which a company and its people operate)
- Relating (building relationships within and across organisations)
- Visioning (creating a compelling picture of the future)
- Inventing (developing new ways to achieve the vision)
The first step to recovery is admission of the possibility of weakness. As the MIT authors say “few people wake up in the morning and say ‘I'm a poor sense-maker’ or ‘I just can't relate to others.’ They tend to experience their own weaknesses more as chronic or inexplicable failures in the organisation or in those around them.”

The article includes a set of 4 descriptions per capability to help leaders examine their own leadership capabilities. No space here to reproduce them all, but they include descriptions like:

- You feel your views describe reality correctly but others' views do not
- You feel that many of your interactions at work are unpleasant, frustrating or argumentative.
- You feel your work involves managing an endless series of crises
- You have difficulty relating your company's vision to what you are doing today.

The MIT team are also clear that no single leader can ever excel in all four capabilities. Typically they have found outstanding leaders of enterprise to be strong in one or two of the capabilities. Andy Grove of Intel is a sense-maker, Herb Kelleher of Southwest Airlines excelled at relating, Steve Jobs of Apple is a visionary, Meg Whitman of eBay an inventor. What a relief! Even today’s “greats” are incomplete!

The answer is in identifying your unique strengths and weaknesses, and then searching for others who can provide the things you are missing.

This stuff applies as much at the team or divisional level of an organisation as it does at the top. Whatever the level it’s the leader’s responsibility to create an environment that lets people compliment one another’s strengths and offset one another’s weaknesses.

As the MIT authors conclude “even the most talented leaders require the input and leadership of others, constructively solicited and creatively applied. It’s time to celebrate the incomplete - that is, the human - leader.”

Next time around Think Piece will expand on this celebration of incomplete leaders and let you into a little original thinking of our own about complete leadership.

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In Praise of the Incomplete Leader (2)

Last time we wrote about the MIT Sloan School article in the Harvard Business Review telling us it was time to end the myth of the complete leader "the flawless person at the top who has got it all figured out" (HBR, February 2007). They sent a very clear warning to leaders who only promote and nurture people in their own image;

Leaders who choose only people who mirror themselves are likely to find their organisations tilting in one direction, missing one or more essential capabilities to survive in a changing complex world.

In this article we will build on the concept of the Incomplete Leader to develop the concept of Whole Leadership.

The Tricordant view of a productive and sustainable organisation is one where there is alignment between the 4 dimensions of;

- Identity (the reason the organisation exists and its enduring core purpose)
- Strategy (how to achieve the core purpose in current times and the current market)
- Systems (the processes to deliver the strategy, including governance, technology, work processes, equipment/plant, role design, rules and procedures)
- Culture (the energy and spirit of the people in the organisation)

We agree wholeheartedly with the MIT view that no single leader can embody all the necessary capabilities for survival in enterprise today. The self-confessed Incomplete Leader will liberate the necessary capabilities within the organisation or positively recruit them from outside if need be.

A problem with leaders however is that (whisper it!) they come and go. In other words, however long they stay, their influence is transient in the great scheme of things. Many top leaders shape organisation arrangements in their own image, around their own skill-set and what they understand. The danger is they devalue the roles they don't understand. Hence the endless and costly rounds of re-structuring whenever new leaders are appointed.

Our question therefore is whether it is possible to combine the transient wisdom of the Incomplete Leader with the design of a durable Whole Leadership architecture to embody distributed leadership for the long term. Call them governance arrangements if you like.

Don't get me wrong. I am not suggesting great leaders don't matter. They absolutely do matter. Nor are we saying new leaders can't change anything in the structures around them. But just as no single leader can embody the 4 MIT leadership capabilities, we believe no single leader can fulfil the core leadership roles for the enterprise to survive in an increasingly open and complex world.

In our model of Whole Leadership we postulate that each of the 4 dimensions of Identity, Strategy, Systems and Culture need to be led. We further postulate that our thinking may rejuvenate leadership in some time-honoured roles that have fallen out of fashion. In fact let's start with the most unfashionable bit first;

- Identity. The identity of an enterprise usually has its roots in the Founder. Where the Founder is still active, more often than not they act as the guardian of purpose. Where they are no longer active, the identity of an enterprise needs a Guardian if it is to remain true to its purpose while navigating turbulent market or environmental change. The plight of many banks who lost their way over the last decade, forgetting their core purpose, could have been avoided if the "conservative" voices who initially urged caution with now discredited strategies had not been quashed. We are not suggesting risk aversion should become the new black, but we are saying there is a vital role for Corporate Guardianship in enterprises who want a sustainable future. A Director of Corporate Governance might be a good proxy. No-executive Directors should do it all the time. And yes these people will annoy the entrepreneurs and risk-takers among you, but get over it because long term they will keep you out of jail!
- **Strategy.** This is the space for the visionaries, the innovators, the strategists and the planners. These are the guys who take the core purpose and shape it for the contemporary environment. They create the compelling vision of the future and invent new ways to achieve it. They make sense of the market. The doers among you see these guys as the dreamers, the impractical heads in the clouds and blue sky thinkers. Get over it, they are the ones who shape your future and without them you won't have one! Call the role Director of Strategy and Planning if you like.

- **Systems.** This is the space for the doers, the practical guys who have to make the core purpose and vision deliverable on the ground. Often they are the no-nonsense Finance Directors who ask uncomfortable questions about how all this creative strategy stuff is going to pay the bills. Sometimes they are the Chief Operating Officers who ask equally uncomfortable questions about the staffing and infrastructure to deliver the strategy when it’s already tough delivering today. These guys are the meat in the delivery sandwich, with reports who carry operational titles like Manager, Administrator, Coordinator, Monitor and Team Leader. The strategists among you hate these guys because they are always obstructing your visions by bringing practical considerations into play. Get over it. Unless these people are connected to the corporate decision-making your enterprise risks delivering systems and products that are completely unaligned to its core purpose. These are the guys who could have told you that out-sourced automated call-handling systems are not the way to deliver on your promise of a personalised customer service. If only you had listened!

- **Culture.** It's the soft stuff that gets stuck in the HR box because it's touchy-feely and we don't know how to measure or influence it. Yet everyone knows culture eats strategy for breakfast. It's the intangible spirit of the organisation that at best inspires, energises and motivates everyone to walk the talk. At worst it suppresses and disables, quashing people’s spirits to the point that they just turn up for work (if that) and do as they are told. In our view culture is a leadership space that can and must be occupied purposefully. But it can't reside in a single individual. It's where leadership operates as Servant Leader, coach and mentor, facilitator and advocate. It's more a characteristic of generic leadership than a single role, but it also needs a role to lead and nurture the desired culture as well as holding the rest of the leadership to account. Make sure this role is also at the top table if you don't want today's vision to be tomorrow's corn flakes.

Our position is that each of the 4 dimensions needs talented and active leadership at the top table of the enterprise in order to keep the organisation sustainable and healthy for the long term. We are not saying they are the only roles at the top table, and nor are we into prescribing job titles. We are saying that the architecture (or governance) of the Whole Leadership organisation must ensure these roles are fulfilled in one way or another at the top table.

That way the MIT model of the Incomplete Leader can have a durability that goes way beyond the tenure of the individual leader and creates sustainable distributed leadership for the long term.

We are at risk of breaching the Think Piece 5 minute rule, so need to stop here. But if you would like to continue the conversation please get in touch. We'd love to get your feedback.

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