



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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