Better Leadership Through Unlearning

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Introduction

The reality of the condition of leadership is well established and we certainly have presented sufficient data to support the rather stagnant condition. So now, let us set the stage for real human performance and leadership improvement. Examining the condition conceptually first, industry appears to be caught in an activity trap. Activity is a great pacifier, which tends to make people (managers/leaders) believe they are doing something and something is better than nothing. And in the mind of most managers/leaders, activity equals success. The problem with this philosophy is that activity expends resources, both human and financial, and is like going to concert or a show. Activities are events, feel good things. Kirkpatrick's levels of learning identify Reaction, Learning, Application to the workplace, and Business results. Activities/events fall into the Reaction level; feel good, excitement, and believing something really happened. Rarely are the other three levels considered or measured. As we have said before, things come to a screeching halt when learnings are taken back to the workplace.

The alternative is to take a higher altitude perspective, which yields great opportunities. We liken these opportunities to space travel: it take lots of hard work, planning, and a leap of faith (which leaders and managers seem to have a very tough time making). While it is not clear why there is such resistance to taking the leap, we believe empirically the rationale behind it, is risk, insecurity, and loss of control, all of which affect acceptance. However, we do believe there are other factors affecting acceptance of change, which we discuss in this article.

Topics to be discussed:
- Creating an environment where people can grow and bringing out the best in people. This requires listening and being willing to let people make mistakes without having their heads chopped off.
- What is enlightened management? Is it just a buzzword and the flavor of the month?
- Unlearning bad habits, perceptions and attitudes.

Creating an Environment

Consistent with our higher altitude perspective, there are lists, checklists, guidelines and recipes for leadership. We probably wore our readers out lecturing about Elixirs of leadership. We truly believe effective leadership is not a checklist but rather a broader environmental issue. An effective leader must create and sustain an environment that fosters open mindedness, acceptance, prudent risk, innovation, empowerment and experimentation. An environment that never tolerates comments like; "we don't do it that way here." Humility replaces pride and ego, servitude replaces command and control. Listening is the higher-level skill over talking. Understanding context and adapting overtakes prescriptive, inflexible attitudes.

While we believe creating the environment has always been essential, with the world as it is and is changing, this approach is the only way we will move the needle on leadership quality. Young people will not respond to old school methods. The "things have always been done this way" is no longer a valid argument. That is not to say we should discard institutional knowledge or experience. This is a huge issue particularly as baby-boomers retire. The environment must respect knowledge and experience

but also allow for creativity and innovation. It is a difficult balance and a difficult leadership challenge. It takes enlightened leaders to understand this balance between institutional knowledge and new and sometimes radical ideas.

Enlightened Management

Enlightened management is a nice thought. In fact, many might consider Enlightened Management an oxymoron! Think of all the people you have worked for and with. How many would you consider enlightened? Many were certainly capable, but were they truly enlightened? In the not too distant past many considered Jack Welsh to be the best leader we have known. Now, after studying the performance of his company General Electric, many question how effective a leader he really was. Was he an enlightened manager? What is enlightened management? Where did the concept come from? Is it achievable?

Is Enlightened Management a new concept or buzzword? Abraham Maslow actually first discussed enlightened Management in the late 1960s. Maslow, who most of us recognize from his famous Needs Hierarchy, was working on what he called humanistic management. In a posthumously published book FUTURE VISIONS Maslow noted: "An authoritarian person or organization does not ask, listen, or solicit honest feedback. Rather, it tells, orders, or makes pronouncements without obtaining feedback, evaluation, or assessing satisfaction or gaining any real knowledge of how the system is working…" Maslow then went on to discuss treating people as human beings and wanting to see them grow as a better way to manage.

So, almost 50 years later and we find ourselves still dealing with authoritative leaders and searching for enlightened leaders. How many of us have too often worked for a person who fits Maslow's description of an authoritarian person or working in an authoritarian organization where pronouncements come down the chain and no feedback is sought or desired? No wonder we are discussing better leadership through unlearning. Certainly not every organization is at this extreme but the traits are still loud and clear in so many. We have seen young leaders filled with new and good ideas be quickly pounded into line by old-line managers.

"That is not the way we do it here!" "When we want new ideas we'll ask for them – and don't hold your breath waiting for someone to ask!"

In traditional hierarchal organizations, all levels of management must understand the concept of creating an encouraging environment where ideas are valued and feedback is welcome. The people in the first several layers of supervision and management are in the middle. They can make or break those above them if they feel or believe whatever they do may not be consistent with the desires of their bosses. This then rolls downhill into the core of the organization, diminishing and depreciating all the good intentions. An enlightened leader at one of these levels is good but, unless those above are willing to open up the authoritarian nature of the organization, that enlightened person will have some success but nowhere near what it could be.

How do we get this concept engrained into the culture of the organization? People who are willing to keep pushing new ideas helps. Unfortunately, there is no easy answer. Organizational momentum and learning from those who are above is the way the new ideas stagnate and we get the same old behaviors. It, too often, takes a crisis to force an organization "off dead center".

The concept of enlightened management gets into the nitty gritty of organizational life. All those 'management' issues, are mostly people related - hiring, firing, assigning work, holding people accountable, performance assessment, etc. For an organization to be "enlightened", the philosophy of enlightened management must become pervasive throughout all aspects of the organization. You cannot have an enlightened organization if the policies and procedures force authoritarianism. Going back to the question of whether Jack Welsh was an enlightened manager, we look at his philosophies of cutting the "bottom 10%" each year and selling off a business line if it was not number one or number two in its field. What about working to develop that bottom 10% or build up the "non-performing" business lines? Isn't that what an enlightened leader would do?

Learning to Unlearn

Traditional leadership development focuses on those 'things' people should learn about leadership. The lists are well known; just pick up a flyer for some celebrity heavy leadership show, or any other leadership program promotional mailing. For years, the topics are essentially the same. For over 20 years, we too conducted the conventional topical approach. Methods vary but content is consistent depending on the audience and understood needs. This is not bad; the content is solid and provides good information. The challenge becomes how the person receiving the content understands it in their context/world. How is the message internalized, or is it even heard? Does the person consider it relevant, or do they discount it as 'I know better and don't need this?' Is the message counter to a fundamental value or belief of the person hearing it? Does the person hearing realize these "new" concepts are contrary to organizational culture and their own influencers?

October 2018 we talked about Stale Leadership and introduced the concept of a paradigm shift. That shift was one of Introspection. When we talk about unlearning, we are taking introspection to the next level. Of course, the key aspect is getting a leader/manager to recognize that things need to change going forward and to do that how that person does things must change. This means understanding and accepting that the old ways must be unlearned.

Honest Self-Assessment of Those Things to Unlearn

Below is a list of things that can influence decisions and influence the ability/ease of unlearning established habits and methods. These are the factors that often subconsciously influence your daily activities. For example if you were brought up in a home and work environment that stressed following orders and not rocking the boat you will have a rough time unlearning your existing philosophies and operating habits.

Unlearning Self-Assessment influencers:
- Prejudice
- Values
- Perceptions
- Religion
- Environment
- Social and financial status
- Parents
- Military
- School
- Politics

We believe the above influencers have a profound impact on each individual's framework of the world and its peoples. The challenge for leadership development is when something is taught, how do these influencers conflict with effective leadership learning? The next challenge is how does one resolve these conflicts, or not? Do these influencers take precedence over established good practices? Can these influencers be overcome to unlearn and learn a new approach?

Is it possible to unlearn specific things stemming from these influencers? How does one sort all this out, identifying which influencer, comparing and contrasting the impact of an influencer against some new learning and overcoming the old learning?

What are the triggers that force one back to a comfortable state rather than one that must exercise a new learning? Once you reconcile your influencers and are ready to accept and apply new learning, what happens when your subordinates or your bosses challenge that new learning? Can you hold your ground and explain why this new way will improve the organization, or do you succumb to pressure and go back to your old ways?

These are all issues we believe impacts the effectiveness of leaders and leadership development. The classic 'Chainsaw Al' story of Al Dunlap the turnaround guru, who we considered effective in the paper business with Crown Zellerbach and Scott paper, but a failure in the consumer products world of Sunbeam, demonstrates

that context plus a lack of recognizing the need to unlearn became his demise. Unlearning and our Contextual leadership are essential components for leaders to understand, internalize and demonstrate self-discipline.

Specific Actions to Unlearn

The challenge is the 'how.' How does one unlearn. Moreover, how does one recognize when one of their triggers is hit, and how to mitigate its effect in lieu of a more enlightened approach? This is a tall order and takes significant effort and introspection. The level of introspection is greater the lower you are in the organization. At a high level if the executive or senior manager sees the value in this the people lower in the organization will see a new approach as "coming from on high". If a lower level manager becomes convinced of the value of introspection and makes a major change he or she must then deal with both those below and those above who challenge the new thinking. It will take fortitude and might not work in every organization. However, the value to the organization can be tremendous.

Methods

Tools necessary to affect change are yet another challenge. One is ongoing awareness. Get in tune with oneself. On a routine basis when triggered, recognize it, place it into one of the influencer categories, and attempt to temper your reaction. This is a first step, which will take significant practice. The next is another difficult method, journaling. In a high tech world of smart phones, etc. writing in a journal sounds archaic. Journaling can be an incredibly effective method of understanding your triggers, influencers and metrics. If done properly and routinely, journaling provides information about oneself on a continuum. The continuum provides insights into the benefits of those situations handled effectively as well as learnings regarding situations where the triggers took one back to behaviors less than those of effective leaders. Use these tools to help build your approach, your confidence and your ability to overcome obstacles.

Measures of Success

In this overall process, unless metrics are established, progress cannot be determined. For metrics to be useful, each individual must create their own based on their Self-Assessment and triggers, with some help. Rather than attempt to explain this process, we are providing a few examples from a leadership program of several years ago. Please note these are examples and will most certainly be different for different individuals.

Decision-making	**Communication**	
Action Item	Action Item	Action Item
1. Be more aggressive in realizing needs – physical and/or human resources then implementing action	1. Become more assertive with opinions in areas where I am most qualified	2. Show more appreciation (verbally and/or formally) for work well done and when help is provided
Metric –	Metric –	Metric –
Record the number of times I feel I am responding more aggressively and the times I resort to former behaviors and indicate the reason.	How do I feel about situations where I could have been more assertive or was more assertive, evaluate the outcomes in both cases.	Establish a recognition routine and measure how well you are complying with it.
Document the times I move out of my comfort zone, and the results of my actions.	Solicit a few close colleagues as critical evaluators to provide feedback and record their impressions.	Monitor progress of planned/routine work as well as emergent work on overall progress for improvement.

Developing metrics can be challenging, requiring additional thought as well as, future development. As you can see, journaling is a key tool here.

Conclusion

By following many our articles over the past several years, we are continually perplexed by the sluggish results of leadership development efforts; as well as, reports/surveys indicating stagnant leadership effectiveness, despite the level of effort, nationally and globally, to improve the condition.

Therefore, we reviewed the reports and surveys, along with our empirical findings in search of insights. As with most situations, the answers were staring at us but we were not seeing them. This is not to say we have all the answers, but we are gaining insights.

While our focus is on providing leadership topics that may fly in the face of traditional leadership practices, plus feedback from our attendees of resistance once they return to the workplace, we did not see the challenge of unlearning. Unlearning throughout the organization. Old traditional hierarchical thinking appears to bog down organizations and more so in today's business and technological environment. Unlearning old practices, habits, thoughts, perspectives and methods opens the doorway to new approaches allowing an organization to grow and prosper in a rapidly changing world.

Perhaps the first step is to acknowledge that unlearning is a barrier to moving forward toward enlightenment. With this acknowledgement, focus leadership development on the effective leadership practices while individually recognizing those influencers that are barriers to internalizing and implementing effective leadership practices. Embedded in this is the need for the overall leadership structure to participate in Self-Assessment, Actions for Unlearning, Measures of Success and Methods for making unlearning a sustainable and ongoing leadership development journey. We understand the approach we suggest challenges organizations at high levels, but we also believe by implementing a framework as discussed above, we can begin to move the leadership effectiveness/quality needle in the right direction.