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Leadership – The Unseen Rudder.

by
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I see an analogy to many of the questions on leadership in the humble sailing ship. Rulers may subjugate the crew with fear and punishment; leaders may stand at the bow and inspire others to seek the adventure; followers may choose to contribute small and less lofty activities in order to enable the ship to sail; when the wind blows it is definitely the sails that become the generators of energy and motion; but it is the rudder that lies beneath the surface, unseen and unpretentious, only reflected on the deck in the ship's wheel, that sets the course. It is the rudder that maintains focus on that course even when everyone and everything on deck is struggling or in disarray.

Leadership can be a man sitting in a jail cell for 27 years as the unseen rudder of a nation, as we saw in Nelson Mandela. It can be the patient maintenance of the ideals of human joy that causes a regime commanding over 1.3 billion people to consider the Dalai Lama a political threat. It can also be the resolute act of a single woman who stands firm when challenged in the defence of not only a long and distinguished history, but also of her unshakable belief that it is the people who benefit from her service as a health professional that are paramount as I have witnessed at a small family business.

For all these leaders, the rudder stayed firm, sometimes without deliberate action or determined steering. Leaders are sometimes judged as having 'lost their way' or 'lost their direction'. Some might think this about Robert Mugabe who may still be a leader, but who seems to be without leadership. Barrack Obama may

well suffer criticism about his ability to be the leader and how well prepared his ship is for sailing, but what is the state of his 'rudder'? What is the determination behind the direction in which he wishes to forge a new path? And if everything above the waterline is going to be under attack, how do the people know that his or any other person's 'leadership', their rudder, is set, strong and unwavering? Perhaps these questions can be answered from an interpersonal neurobiology perspective.

The literature describes a number of different types of leadership: distributed (Spillane, 2006); inclusive (Ryan, 2006); charismatic (Mumford, 2008); congruent (Ladkin, 2008); authentic (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) transactional (Burns, 2003); and transformational (Burns, 2003) are just a taste of the many and varied discussions on offer. We can also look at the nature of leadership within gender, religious persuasion, ideology and even the antitheses of anarchy and individualism, but, as interesting as these topics are, it is far too wide a scope for the moment. Each of the words used above is enough to paint a rough sketch of what they refer to.

The thing that is most interesting about leadership from the IPNB perspective is that it something that can only occur in the environment of a group. It is a purely interpersonal concept and practice. It *needs* people.

Pulitzer Prize winner, James Burns, describes Leadership as: "Summoned forth by human wants, the task of leadership is to accomplish some change in the world

that responds to those wants.’ (Burns, 2003, p2). Michael Mumford articulates that ‘... outstanding leadership is based on effective articulation of a future-oriented vision that motivates and directs others while providing a sense of meaning and affective engagement.’ (Mumford, 2008, p145) What I see, in both these statements, the clearly presence of numbers of people. Perhaps it is enough for there to be only 2 people. A simple relationship can exhibit all those qualities of human wants, vision and affective engagement. Equally, these qualities can exist between thousands.

The key elements from the IPNB perspective is ‘wants’, ‘change’, ‘motivates’, ‘sense of meaning’ and ‘affective engagement’. The first thing that comes to mind are mirror neurons (Iacoboni, 2005). The leadership process must depend upon the perception of intention. This is particularly true of the charismatic expression of leadership. Those who choose to follow are inspired by more than just words. American history has quite a list of charismatic leaders from Abraham Lincoln to JFK and Martin Luther King and also, in my view, Barack Obama. Certainly there is a good deal of political argument as to his wider credentials as a President, but there is something about him that grasped the crowds in a way that Hilary Clinton did not seem to be able to do. One might say that you can’t fool mirror neurons. That will be an interesting topic for research one day.

In Australia we have not been so blessed with charismatic leadership. Probably our most charismatic leader was Gough Whitlam who was, sadly, less suited (I yearn for the time we can use the word ‘ept’ as the antonym of inept!) to practicalities as he was with vision and affective engagement. It seems that even if the rudder of the ship is strong and true, if there is a complete abandonment of the upper decks, then the ship of vision will be

just a Mary Celeste, where those who might have benefited are no longer engaged in the possibilities of the voyage. Leadership in isolation ceases to be leadership.

Perhaps we should spend a moment considering the larger group in the leadership process – followers.

Wants and desires can unite people. Romantic couples form lasting bonds on a number of levels that finally develop into an attachment that can last a lifetime (Fisher, 2004). Romantic love may have a number of correlates to the relationship that followers embrace in the more ideological environment of leadership. Future research could investigate to what degree oxytocin alters the relationship between leaders and followers. Oxytocin is very important in the forming of trusting bonds and focussing attention on an individual (Ulvnas-Moberg, 2003) and it is not uncommon to hear people speak of love for a leader whom they have no personal engagement or connection. This is true of the charismatic spokesperson, but equally true of someone absent, such as Nelson Mandella, who was kept alive in the minds of people as a successful meme.

In IPNB we are familiar with the functions of the medial pre-frontal cortex. Followers would need to utilise their capacity for empathy and morality, but might also benefit from a down regulation of the MpFc activity to regulate emotional balance and delaying of reaction responses (Siegel, 2007). Wants and desires are known to be active in the superior orbito-frontal, mid-cingulate and anterior cingulate cortices. Even more interesting is that these areas also activate as we process those things that are undesirable or to which we are indifferent (Kawabata & Zeki, 2008). There are, clearly, neural forces at play when a follower is being swayed to pledge loyalty and trust. These forces must move as well

as ignite passion. This is a very socially and personally engaged process. The internalising effect that mirror neurons contribute is still a subject of research, but it is a well founded speculation. The feeling that we are actually having the same experience as the actor is seen in the painful wincing of the audience at a boxing match and the non-conscious puckering during the romantic scene of a movie (personal observations). We can be confident that the mirror neuron system involves the insula and superior temporal regions (Siegel, 2007) and I believe it is a reasonable imagination that other areas of the mind may be able to access the 'mirror' stimulus for personal affective engagement. My speculation is that once in the insula it is possible for mirror sensation to be processed through the frontal cortex, limbic system and basal ganglia *as if* the experience was personal. This would give rise to a personal awareness of intention and an emotional response. Broadly this is what we know happens, but the lines are yet to be reliably drawn between the dots.

The follower can be motivated and inspired to feel a powerful sense of belonging and engagement with a leader and also to the other followers. It is not unknown for followers to break away from the leader. The French Revolution is a great example of the shift of focus from leaders to a 'mob' action where being a 'citizen' was to be a part of the 'leading' group. Certainly, not to be a citizen was very dangerous for your health. Even early leaders of the revolution like Robespierre found themselves permanently 'disengaged' under the blade of the guillotine! 'People power' is a term used in a number of political struggles. The 1986 yellow colored rebellion against Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines is one of the most prominent in recent history. After a faulty election and a spurious grab for power by Marcos, the people became the leaders (albeit with military support).

They stood firm to the vision of better government. Corazon Aquino became the next president as a *de facto* for her assassinated husband, but clearly she was lifted to high office on the determined leadership of the 'people'.

When the role of leader and follower interchange, it is a strange, but not altogether surprising event. It is often said, philosophically, that a student is also a teacher. There is an exchangeability of needs and wants. As followers begin to gather around a leader that extolls their personal vision they find that their personal feelings were not so isolated after all. A leader may be the focal point of a gathering of followers, but it is the vision that becomes the connecting element. Like the ship's rudder, a vision is unseen and unpretentious. It lives in the 'minds and the hearts' of the group.

We are just beginning, now, to have a deeper understanding of how the neural net around the heart is important to affective tone. Again, research is lacking, which is another open door of opportunity for the future. In fact, the whole subject of leadership is open for proper development and quantification as well as qualification. The recently formed NeuroLeadership Institute, which has a combination of business and neuroscientific participants, is an expression of this new wave of academic focus. That is not to say that leadership is only a recent focus of attention. *The Leadership Quarterly* has been in publication since 1990, but still, in 2008, the subject has "... no grand unifying theory to provide common direction to thinkers and researchers." (Burns, 2003 p2).

Ironically, leadership studies seem to lack that unseen and unpretentious 'rudder' that is such a fundamental need. Equally, it might be said that those that have tried to set a course and deploy a unifying 'rudder' have yet to be successful. Similar things

might be said about IPNB as the GAINS and the Mindsight Institute seek to be expressions of a 'rudder', a 'vision' that we have yet to fully understand. But I digress. Perhaps it is time to look at the other vital element of the leadership process – the leader.

John Naisbitt (1929 -): Leadership involves finding a parade and getting in front of it.

John Quincy Adams (1767-1848): If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader. (Wisdom Quotes, 2008)

Adams, the sixth President of the United States, presents the vital truth about the human experience: to expand, grow and develop. Again we crash headlong into the fundamental principle of IPBN: that interaction between minds/brains creates more than just the individual mind/brain. The idea that autonomy/individualism is merely an illusion (albeit beneficially useful) was addressed in my GAINS article last January (Hill, 2007). This quote illustrates the point again. Encompassing the feeling of personal growth, development and change is the embracing experience of participation with others. It is the task of the leader to give followers a belief that the vision, the 'rudder', can have an expression in reality and a possibility of fulfillment. This quality of nascence (that something desirable will develop in the near future) is one of the elements of harmony that I believe is essential to a positive experience (Hill, 2006). Many others are also looking at these qualities. To 'dream more, learn more, do more and become more' are a reasonable paraphrase for the second and third phases of Positive Psychology (Seligman, 2004). Especially relevant is the process of finding meaning by connecting to something more than just the self.

The leader is not an isolated element, although it is true that not everyone wants to follow. As mentioned before, a leader without followers is not a leader. A person of conviction perhaps, but without others, there is no leading.

Naisbitt is from the philosophy of business, management and motivation. Rather than finding a deeper description of the needs of man, he presents a practical application that produces results – You want to be a leader? Find yourself some followers! As simplistic as his advice may sound, by placing yourself in front of an emotionally active crowd that is looking to move forward and is in a receptive mindset to being given direction is a pretty good idea! The action of mirror neurons alone might be enough to sway the crowd into believing that the person 'out the front' is truly a leader.

We see this in the media all the time. We have an increasing number of people who are famous simply for being famous. Paris Hilton becomes the icon of wealth and freedom for little other reason than because she put herself in front of the parade. In her case the members of the parade accepted her. Others have not been so successful and have even been rejected by the crowd. Brittany Spears may fall into that category (albeit that she still sells lots of CDs). This shows us that being a leader can be a lot less difficult for some – depending on the needs and wants of the followers. For the same reason it can be very difficult for others, even when they espouse shared dreams and visions.

In considering the effectiveness of a leader there is some insight to be gained by applying established models of human behaviour. Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs' (Maslow, 1998) gives us an indicator of both what the leader is providing and what level of need requires satisfying. In France the revolution began with the need for food and physical survival. As the people

improved their conditions into *love/belonging* and *self esteem* there was a change in focus from leaders who only satisfied the base needs of *physiology* and *safety*. Robespierre probably found himself decapitated somewhere between the transition from self esteem to self actualization as the population worked through the moral understanding of nationhood and the satisfying of baser needs through a 'reign of terror' that kept the guillotine so busy.

Strangely, the effect of mass execution may have been very productive for the development of self-efficacy as described by Albert Bandura in 1994 (Bandura, 1994). Moving away from that overly controversial example, we can see in both Adams and Naisbitt's quotes the efforts of the leader in assisting both the followers and the leader themselves to achieve the positive, self motivated benefit of achieving self efficacy. Criticism of both the Hierarchy of Needs and Self Efficacy address the excess focus on the individual. Burns (2003) devotes an entire chapter to the best and worst of these ideas, but he is wise enough to recognize that there is an important relevance for the group in both these ideas.

Bandura makes clear reference to the needs of group consideration and the interactive relevance of social growth, but I suggest that even Bandura has focused too much on the individual as a separate performer in a populated framework. If IPNB teaches me anything it teaches me that we engage with our sense of autonomy and *separateness*, our needs for self-efficacy and self-actualisation as processes that occur *within* a surrounding envelope of population – of others. Leaders are a necessary part of the fabric, of the puzzle, but they are just a part. It is certainly true that losing a single leader can have a much more dramatic effect than losing a single follower, but this is not to say that a single follower cannot create significant change. It is said that the film

of the execution shooting of a North Vietnamese prisoner by a South Vietnamese officer by handgun was enough to turn the mind of journalist Walter Cronkite toward an anti-Vietnam position. This single act may have been the catalyst of change for the war. The death of just one follower, one pawn in the game of war created a new vision and set about changing the position of the rudder. The rest is history.

So, being a leader is about truly understanding the need for others, the connection with others, the sharing of a vision and a powerful energy of forward motion and future possibility. Benjamin Zander, the famous conductor, puts it elegantly as he describes what it is to be a conductor. He learnt to stop asking the question, *What is wrong with them?* and began asking himself, "Who am *I* being that my players' eyes are not shining?" This is a wonderful platform for humility and also for interpersonal creativity.

What he has discovered as a leader of musicians is that it is also about his unshakable belief in his ability to know his dreams. Bandura's *self-efficacy* is an apt description for this interpersonal process of leadership, but it is when self-efficacy is utilized as a means to energetically engage with the surrounding people that being a leader becomes possible. "It is one of the characteristics of a leader, that he not doubt, for one moment, the capacity of the people he is leading to realise whatever he's dreaming." (Zander, 2008) This statement puts leading in clear context of the interactive and interpersonal experience that it is.

The most important thing that has emerged from our discussion here of leadership is that the elements we see – leaders, followers, events, structures, political and moral change – are the quantities of leadership. The qualities, of leadership are, perhaps, something unseeable and

unknowable. It is a vision, a dream, a need, a want, a desire, an intention, an unseen and unpretentious rudder that lies beneath the surface, deep within the emotional psyche of our 'water'. On the surface we gather around it, act because of it and change the world in response to its firmness and sureness. It draws us toward beneficial change. What is the unifying

theory of leadership? Perhaps we will not know until our brains have evolved to appreciate what, for now, is beyond our knowledge. Perhaps it will remain as an expression of numinosum that will draw us forward into the potential wonders of the future on the wing and a prayer of leadership.

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