THE HARDEST LEADERSHIP LESSON: LEARNING TO LET GO

Talk to any leader about their aspirations for their team, department or organisation, and you will often hear about the desire to “empower and engage” teams and team members.

“We need to decentralise decision-making”, will often be stated as a goal. “They (whoever ‘they’ are need to come up with solutions, but they cannot see beyond what is happening now”, will often be the complaint.

Sometimes, you hear the heartfelt complaints that, “they keep waiting to be told what to do”, or “they just don’t get it”.

Indeed, the most fundamental inconsistency that exists today in most large organisations is the gap between a leaders’ desire for “empowerment and engagement” of team members, and what ends up happening during the personal interactions of leaders with these same team members. Often, these actions inadvertently have the effect of reducing the teams drive toward empowerment.

When such attempts at engagement occur and then fail, it is all too easy to blame the team and its members. The truth is, and it is a hard reality to grasp, it is the leader that probably needs to look at themselves for the problem. Think of all your failed relationships, failed efforts etc. What is the one common denominator? Yes, it is you.

The problem is that in the heat of the moment, our leadership brains are wired to take control and give direction. It feels good. We get to solve problems, reduce uncertainty by giving instructions, and raise our level of status and authority.

In the NHS, we love a good bit of crisis management, we make heroes and heroines of those that step in and solve a problem. Rarely do we stop and reflect on those interventions and ask ourselves whether the approach to a crisis solved the fundamental problem, or had the effect of just putting a sticking plaster on the symptoms, only for it to peel off, and the problem re-emerge at some later date.

Unfortunately, what feels good for us usually feels bad for our people. No one ever did anything that changed the world, or just downright ‘great’ because they were told to. The degree to which we order people around suppresses any opportunity for greatness. Usually people see it as a reason to do the minimum. They start to think, “Well, if we just do what he/she wants for now, they will go away until they have their next big idea.

In Harley Davidson, the workers used to call each new leadership programme or strategy, which came around with monotonous regularity as AFPs. AFP stood for ‘Another Fine Programme (actually the ‘F’ stood for something else, but I am in polite company here.

The thinking was the boss had been on a new leadership course, saw some new ideas and came back full of enthusiasm. Workers thought that if they just did the minimum to make it look like something was happening, that would suffice until the boss went to his/her next course.

On the contrary, telling people what to do is the opposite of giving responsibility. When we tell people what to do, we may as well just preface it with “I am now absolving you of all responsibility for what happens here. You are completely free should it go wrong, to tell all your friends and colleagues that the manager completely cocked-up big time, and it was nothing to do with you. Now what I want you to do is …”

The problem here is with the leader.

We need to remember that what usually got us promoted are different skills to those of a leader. How most of us got promoted was doing a good job. That is all we had responsibility for in our early career, our tasks were set out, we completed them well, we got promoted. We continue to do our tasks well, and we get promoted again.

That is, until we have a senior role when we are not responsible for getting tasks done any more, we are responsible for the individuals that are responsible for completing the tasks. Those thinking, engaged, feeling individuals who are keeping our organisations on track.

In the early 1960s, Stanley Milgram wanted to understand how susceptible people were to doing just what they were told, and what their willingness to obey an authority figure was, even when ordered to take actions that would hurt someone else.

The experiment became quite infamous: Participants were placed in the role of a “teacher” who administered electric shocks to a “learner.” Every time the learner answered a question incorrectly, the teacher was supposed to administer greater and greater levels of electric shock. The settings on the machine at the higher settings indicated that the learner would be harmed at those levels.

The teachers were led to believe the learner was in a different room although there was no learner and no one was shocked. Milgram played recordings to make it sound like the learner was in a great deal of pain and wanted to end the experiment.

Despite these protests, many participants continued the experiment when the authority figure urged them to, increasing the voltage after each wrong answer until some eventually administered what would be lethal electric shocks. Even where participants objected, they were usually prepared to continue when told things like, “it is for their own good”, “they really need to learn this” or “it is for a greater good/purpose”.

We really can convince ourselves that, “I was only obeying orders”, absolves us from responsibility.

Similar experiments conducted since the original have provided nearly identical results, indicating that people are willing to go against their consciences if they are being told to do so by authority figures.

As a leader, we have a moral and ethical responsibility to recognise that people are willing to go against their consciences if they are being told to do so by authority figures.

So, any organisation that fosters an “I’ll tell you and you do it” approach will be susceptible to this disconnect. It’s the “I’ll tell you” from the leader that absolves people of the responsibility for their actions and allows humans to do the worst things possible, and turn to that old response to mass crimes, “I was just doing what I was told.”

Relying upon a benevolent leader isn’t the answer—the answer is to get everyone thinking and everyone taking responsibility for their behaviour and actions. The next time you are tempted to tell someone what to do, and enforce a degree of power over them, whether formalised or not, think twice—and ask them what they think the right thing to do is. As Peter Senge notes, “Every time I tell you something, I am asking for your submission.

Any organisation that takes a top-down, ‘tell’em like it is’, command/control approach has no right to then blame their people when they fail to take their own initiative to solving problems, or defer decisions up-the-line.

The problem is that it seems like a big, and very scary, step from telling people what to do to not telling people what to do.

One of the most effective ways is to recognise that this journey needs to be done incrementally.

Think about an organisation that has level upon level of managers all doing the same thing; telling the level below them what to do, holding people to account, and performance management people to within an inch of their lives.

One day, the Executive Team announce a change, “from now on”, they say, “we are going to ask people what to do about the problems they face, we are going to trust people to take the decisions they think are best based on the information that they have”. What do the teams now think? Will years of conditioning be removed overnight?

David Marquet in his book ***“Turn the ship around”*** (Penguin) suggests an approach he refers to as the “ladder of leadership.”

The ladder of leadership (below) is a construct for measuring and affecting empowerment based upon the words people say.



It is very difficult for workers to be higher on the ladder than the boss. Whatever level the boss is on puts a ceiling on the level of empowerment the workers can attain.

<u>The language we use matters immensely when leading</u>.

At the bottom, we have the team member asking, "tell me what to do" and the leader stating, "I'll tell you what to do". As we move up the ladder the worker gains in voice and authority and ownership.

The point of this is not to force the worker to move up the ladder but to move ourselves, as leaders, up the ladder.

While we cannot force someone to move from 'tell me what to do' (level 1) to a team member that offers their ideas; "I think" (level 2), we can, however, consistently show up as a level 2 boss, asking our teams what they think. This is not only a more enjoyable dynamic; it taps the collected knowledge of your team rather than just the knowledge of one leader.

The lessons for the Ladder of Leadership came from David Marquet's experience as a Captain in the US Navy on board the nuclear submarine *USS Santa Fe*.

Very early on in his command he gave an order that could not be performed, but the second-in-command ordered it anyway. The second-in-command knew it could not be performed, but he ordered it because "I was ordered to." We train people to be compliant and conform. Then we hope that they will think for themselves. Really, how likely is that to be a successful strategy?

When leaders make mistakes, we point to them and make scapegoats of them. Often the organisation follows the leader over the cliff. The problem is not leaders making mistakes, the problem is leaders giving the orders.

For example, Captain Schettino of the cruise ship *Costa Concordia* was vilified in the world's media because he took his ship too close to the island of Giglio, turned too late, ran aground and sank his ship with the loss of 39 lives. The focus of press attention was on the error he made.

The real question isn't "What was the captain thinking?" but "Why was the captain of the cruise ship giving orders?"

While this might seem like an unusual question, we know that when the top person in a hierarchy gives an order, those below him/her are likely to follow them even when they think they are the wrong orders. Should not decision-making be placed closest to those with the information? who has the most information about what's happening on the ground? The people delivering the service. The real need is for leaders to push decision-making down the organisation.

Level 1 of the ladder of leadership, "tell me what to do," is often camouflaged. For example, bringing a problem without a solution is a camouflaged "tell me what to do." When you hear "tell me what to do," resist providing an immediate answer. Providing an answer promotes dependency and deprives your people of the ability to grow into leaders.

If people have worked for a top-down, 'tell'em' like it is boss for a long time, then they might be reluctant to immediately volunteer what they think. So here are some strategies you can try to encourage someone at "tell me what do" to "tell you what they think":

- **Make it small** – Let's look at one tiny piece of the problem. Break the problem down into small, more manageable components. For example, "What do we know about the needs of the client/patient, and what is important to them?"
- **Change perspective** – "How do you think the commissioner would want this solved?" OR "What would you do if you were me?"
- **Fast forward** – "OK, it is Monday now, but let's say it is Friday at 5 p.m. We have solved this perfectly. What would we have done?" OR "It's six months from now? What have we done to be wildly successful?"

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