

LEADERSHIP AND HIGH PERFORMANCE

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Effective leadership and high performance go hand in hand. It is part of the core work of modern leadership to be able to achieve a high level of performance from your people and to be able to influence them to work and perform really well together.

There are various managerial approaches to achieve high performance and some of these are effective although their attractiveness may be questionable. Amazon is one of the fastest growing and most successful companies in the digital age having passed Walmart as the number one capitalized retailer in the USA. However, a recent expose of work culture and work practices by the New York Times suggests a “dog eat dog” environment based on the principle of “survival of the fittest” and a demand for work intensity and scrutiny more akin to a highly paid and prestigious investment bank or professional services firm in the West or a sweatshop competitor in a developing country. I do not know if this is an accurate description of Amazon.

However, work cultures built on carrots and sticks have been shown to be effective at times. I remember sitting in a classroom at Harvard Business School more than twenty years ago while our Professor raved about the success and longevity of a particular American tool company we were examining which operated entirely on the basis of financial rewards and punishment. Their management philosophy appeared to be no more sophisticated than the application of the principle of “Pavlov’s dog” and it seemed to be working for them. But would I want to work there? It reminded me of episodes in my Catholic childhood when visiting “fire and brimstone” missionary priests would have a definite impact on our moral compliance by scaring the pants off us about the future flames of hell, while dangling the carrot of a more peaceful future with the angels in heaven.

There is an alternative to the reported Amazon approach - develop leadership capacity and a leadership culture to achieve high performance without the punitive measures and with greater levels of fulfilment and loyalty. The co-founder of the equally successful Facebook company has responded to the New York Times article by suggesting that work hours and practices in many IT companies are not only unduly onerous on staff but they are unnecessary and even counter-productive for creativity and high performance.

This is not to say that high performance is always achieved cheaply or easily through leadership. There can be a certain amount of “blood, sweat and tears” involved in our leadership efforts too, but it pales when compared with other more transactional approaches to people and performance. For instance, I often tell senior managers on our leadership development programs that a transformation in individual and collective performance is possible during and after our course, but it is unlikely to come cheaply. I have written before about how the performance of the individual and collective are inextricably intertwined – see my articles “Leadership that Transforms Groups and Organizations” and “Leaders and the Stockholm Syndrome”. One of the methods which we use on our leadership programs to provide sufficient intensity and insight to bring about a breakthrough in performance is a modified version of group-as-case or case-in-point method which I first learnt from Ron Heifetz at Harvard University. Again, that matching of intensity and insight is important. We often hear from commentators how poorly performing sports teams just need to work harder, but often there is no shortage of motivation and hard slog by the losing players and still no success. Intensity is important but so are skill and insight and decision-making.

The modified group-as-case method which I use is very simple. I set a task or question for the group and we and they provide real time feedback to the group regarding the quality of relating, communicating, problem-solving and creating together. We also attempt to identify the current adaptive challenges facing the group if it is to succeed in achieving the learning aspirations for the program. As the leader of the session it always involves some risk and anxiety for me to be fully straight with the group in my feedback on their performance. Part of the leadership skill is practising how to be straight and to provide value to managers without reactivating their egos and identities too much. Beneficial

impact by leaders depends not just on what we do and how we do it but on the source of our action – something which Otto Scharmer argues is the “blind spot” of current leadership thinking and practice – and I find that performance feedback works best when leaders are operating from a place of respect and relatedness. Another critical element is that I refuse to be mechanistic and compare the group against some benchmark or other group, but rather try to help them to identify in the here and now what is needed and missing if they are to achieve their transformational goal.

Some clients invite me into their organisations because of my reputation for being a straight talker and being able to influence dramatic shifts in work groups similar to what they experienced with their own leadership program group. I have developed what I call my “Five Foci Framework” for leadership work inside organisations, which includes this Collaboration and Performance Dialogue as well as the Change Focus, the Strategy Focus, the Creativity and Innovation Focus, and the Challenges and Opportunities Focus. But not everybody enjoys our group-as-case sessions and some would prefer that we skipped them. Their value is that they help us to shine a spotlight on relationships and performance and to build a “container” not just for the managers’ stunning and creative group work but also for their individual breakthroughs.

When I do shorter courses with clients I do not include group-as-case because it can be too challenging for the time-scale or because there is no permission for me to stretch them that way. We can still get good results, but it is not possible to go as “fast or deep” without building this container. I always remember my puzzlement at the instructions from the local CEO of a global pharmaceutical company who was looking for a dramatic improvement in the effectiveness of his executive team but insisted to us that no one was allowed to feel anxious in the process. The path to high performance may not always be a bed of roses, but it can be worth the price. On our senior leadership programs, for instance, I am always amazed at the performance levels achieved by groups of strangers given the earlier sluggish and torpid stages of their progress. Towards the end there is so much respect and affection in the group, and fun and creativity, and an alacrity and clarity of insight which was

unimaginable previously. As the saying goes “A rising sea raises all boats”. Wouldn’t it be nice to have some more of that in our organisations?

However when it comes to leaders getting the best performance out of particular individuals, evocative rather than provocative methods regularly are the best approach. I have discovered that most of the individuals with whom I have worked over the past twenty years have strong values and a profound purpose which sits behind their daily organisational life. Good leaders help those who work for them to keep tapping into this core purpose both for motivation and inspiration.

Of course leaders also use rewards, and development inputs and corrective procedures to improve performance. And they use organisational techniques. For instance, the military have known for a long time that they cannot rely on respect for the top brass or affection for the institution to keep soldiers performing well in times of war. Often soldiers have become quite sceptical and derisive about the military and about the cause itself. Yet many keep making horrendous personal sacrifices and bringing their best effort to the task. The military encourages and relies on the strong bonds and mateship which the soldiers have developed with their immediate unit and their respect and loyalty for their more junior direct commander.

Having introduced the topic of war let me turn to peace. A question which leaders need to ask themselves is: Why would someone perform at their best for you? Sometimes individuals don’t perform at their best because they get caught up in the negative churn and self-imposed limitations of their own Identity. I am not religious but I believe that the Buddhist writer Thich Nhat Hanh is possibly the wisest person that I have ever read. This is a modified quote on this topic from one of his many books called “The Art of Power”: “A good leader and teacher can show us that in our own mind and heart we also have a teacher and we need to listen to that teacher... A true leader will always encourage us to be in touch with the teacher within us... We have to know how to respect and love ourselves, how to return to our true nature, to see our capabilities and qualities, the wholesome, the good, the true and the beautiful within us. A good leader brings this out of us.” If you are looking for an aspirational benchmark to set for your leadership performance, try that one!