

THE CURIOUS LEADER

By Richard Searle, www.searleburke.com , richard@searleburke.com

If you are not growing as a leader you will be shrinking and sinking. Treading water seems best left to sitting ducks.

This observation has arisen from my reflections on the role of curiosity in leadership. My curiosity about curiosity has been sparked by reading a recent biography of Leonardo Da Vinci by the innovation specialist Walter Isaacson. He quotes the art historian Kenneth Clarke who has described Leonardo as “the most relentlessly curious man in history”. Just taking a peek at one of Leonardo’s daily “to do” lists from his personal diaries is enough to leave you exhausted. An example from the 1490s includes: learn “the measurement of Milan and its suburbs; get the master of arithmetic to show you how to square a triangle; get a master of hydraulics to tell you how to repair a lock, canal and mill in the Lombard manner; observe the goose’s foot: if it were always open or always closed the creature would not be able to make any kind of movement; why is the fish in the water swifter than the bird in the air?” I am certain Leonardo was also an expert in treading ducks! But in case you are tempted to think that he was super human, it is wise to remember that he was full of our human foibles. For instance, he lobbied heavily to have the magnificent statue of David by his younger rival Michelangelo, relegated to an obscure Florentine alley way and covered with a fig leaf.

The curious business leader of today is living in a period of extraordinary technological and economic change, which is both fueling and demanding learning, innovation and entrepreneurship. Organizations are adopting a wide range of approaches to encourage innovation, including design thinking, agile, lean, sprints, and the like. Recently, I have been working with thirty major engineering and construction companies who are sponsoring innovation projects with teams of students from the Masters of Engineering at the University of Melbourne. In collaboration with others I have developed and facilitated a program called Leading Innovative Teams as part of this Innovation Initiative. On

the project side, the innovation process has focused on design thinking, customer jobs which need to be done, value propositions, creative insights, pivoting and pitching. But for the projects to be innovative, the teams themselves need to be collaborative, insightful and innovative. Here we use our leadership insight dialogue framework to demonstrate how leadership can influence teams to move from less productive normative and positional team processes, to the more reflective and generative stages of group performance.

The times are also ripe for entrepreneurship. Twenty years ago most MBA students aspired to become senior managers – now a large proportion of them intend to be entrepreneurs in their own start-ups. The digital revolution is throwing up so many opportunities. In the past we associated entrepreneurs with money, but the modern entrepreneur is best known for their ideas. Dave Austin who has taught Entrepreneurship both at Melbourne Business School and the Engineering Faculty urges budding entrepreneurs to ask a simple curious question: What unmet need can I help a customer to meet? Large organizations are searching for ways to develop an entrepreneurial and innovative mindset in their leaders despite the bureaucratic obstacles that size implies.

The world of the arts has much to teach us about innovation. For instance, Elvis Presley is often cited as one of the most influential figures in the emergence of rock n roll. Elvis was a little before my time but I can still remember my brother who was a decade older than me, imitating his moves in the bathroom of our family home. A recent documentary on Elvis made me realize what a liberating force he was in the conformist 1950's. Elvis was a very poor and very polite kid from rural Mississippi. What made him different is that he was curious about music – not just Pat Boone music, but gospel music, blues music, country music, as well as popular music. Young Elvis had eclectic tastes. This eclecticism made him different for a white person in racially divided America and Ku Klux Klan Mississippi. It wasn't philosophical - he just loved music - which meant he spent a lot of time hanging out with black musicians and attending black church. Elvis was able to translate these original roots of rock n roll to a white audience. His genius was to bring it all together in the original Elvis way, but even his signature leg movements he adapted from the theatrical black gospel preachers. And he was able to inspire other musicians such as the Beatles, who were able to entertain young people like me during my slightly boring adolescence in regional Bendigo.

The arts can also teach us about the different paths to creativity and innovation. Peter Cebon, who teaches Innovation on the Masters of Engineering at the University of Melbourne, alerted me to the process that led to the creation of Leonard Cohen's most famous song "Hallelujah". The Beatles wrote many of their greatest hits in minutes and on the back of serviettes. Some artists have painted their masterpieces in the brief time it takes for the paint to dry. Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" was not like that! It has been covered by hundreds of famous artists, and appeared in countless movies and television series, but its original version by Cohen was pretty awful and forgettable. Malcolm Gladwell has made a podcast about its gestation. The song which is so loved today was rescued by J J Cale who appreciated its potential and reorganized it. His niche version was then copied and made popular by Jeff Buckley who had the lucky misfortune for an artist to die young and tragically. Only then did Leonard re-enter the picture and record another version of his own song based on the JJ Cale version, but with the inspired idea to slow the pace of the song to a crawl. And through this iterative process involving many contributors, a classic was born.

Your leadership may not require you to paint the Mona Lisa or write "Hallelujah". But if you want to be effective and fulfilled then it will require you to be curious. The Buddhists have the idea that to be mindful it is best to develop a "Beginner's Mind". Don't strive to be expert at life, but rather cultivate being a beginner. I consider that leadership also works best with a Beginner's Mind. Certainly, it helps to have experience and expertise, but if your approaches to and experiences of leadership, are to stay fresh and innovative then it helps to meet each moment as if it was a new moment. After all, it is a new moment.

If you keep experiencing déjà vu in your work life and your leadership feels stale for you, then improve your eyesight or seek new shores. The worst thing that can happen to leadership is to become formulaic and prescriptive, and to pump out cheap, easy answers to tricky challenges or great new opportunities.

