FOLLOWERSHIP

The case for promoting followership within business

The Importance of Leadership

It is a self-evident truth that businesses need good leadership if they are to succeed. A report prepared recently by the Australian Human Resources Institute in conjunction with the Committee for Economic Development of Australia[1] underlines the point when it comments that "leadership is a critical factor affecting business in Australia and internationally". The report goes on to observe that in a survey sponsored by these two organisations, CEO's in Australia rated "employing and developing leaders third in a list of twelve business success factors marginally behind "recruiting and retaining skilled employees" and "increasing customer satisfaction".

The Leadership Crisis

Yet despite the key role they play in corporate life business leaders are under growing pressure today both domestically and internationally. Chief Executives are being criticised for not producing desired organisational outcomes and in many cases they do not have the trust of major stakeholders such as shareholders and employees. Moreover the reputations of many business leaders are growing weaker. Resentment is building over CEO remuneration as corporate performance flounders, job losses continue and much vaunted high level leadership characteristics such as toughness, charisma and flamboyance fail to prove the magic ingredients for improving organisational performance.

The community perception of the failings of business leaders has been compounded by the apparent failure on the part of government, business and academia to develop the capacity for creating leaders. Notwithstanding the enormous amounts of money poured into leadership training and development by business and the community there is no established formula, system or process that guarantees leaders able to produce high quality results in all circumstances. Moreover while there is general agreement on the competences required by leaders, those who are seen as being particularly successful are often characterised by a list of traits that any mortal outside a Hollywood movie set could not hope to meet.

Finally, the supply of potential leaders is becoming a problem in itself. The ageing of the population coupled with a falling fertility rate both domestically and internationally means there is a looming shortage of potentially effective leaders at a time when the successful management of intergenerational change will present many new challenges to business and the community.

Revisiting the Concept of Leadership

One approach to this leadership crisis is to revisit our established notions of leadership and to try to identify any changes to existing thinking that might lead to an increase in the effectiveness of business leaders in particular.

The Cult of Leadership

The dominant modern view of leadership stems from the 1840's when the English philosopher, Thomas Carlyle put forth his theory of the "great man" as the prime mover of history and change. Carlyle saw leaders as special men (and only men) who had the intellectual ability to see things as they were, to create values and who, by virtue of their actions, demonstrated a "fitness to rule". While later thinkers like the Russian writer Tolstoy attacked the practice of fixing responsibility for what occurs in life onto "great people" and endowing them with heroic virtues often after the fact, (Tolstoy believed that the actions of the makers of history depend on the actions of countless other people who contributed to the cause, both before and after the leader appears on the stage) Carlyle's view is echoed in the strong perception held today that gifted leadership provides the key to organisational success. In America there is a "cult of leadership" in which men like Jack Welch, Lee Iacocca and in his time Al Dunlap have all been lauded as messiahs who have worked corporate miracles with little apparent help from others.

A Question

In view of the emerging criticisms of business leaders the time would seem to be right for us to ask if this "cult of leadership" is based on myths that are stopping us from gaining a clear picture of the true nature of leadership. Consider the following for example:

- Leaders contribute on the average no more than 20% to the success of organisations. Those who follow the leader are critical to the completion of the remaining 80%.

- Most people working in organisations, irrespective of their title, spend more time following than leading. Moreover most people move across and back between leading and following on a continuous basis throughout their working day.

- For most people following represents 70 to 90 percent of their lives. Most people follow more than they lead.[2]

- While people spend most of their working life contributing as followers to the success of their organisations, there is

little discussion of what is the role of the follower and how it relates to that of the leader. In most debates on leadership the 80-90% of people who actually do the work never get a mention.

Surely the follower has some claim to recognition as a player in the leadership game?

Recognising the Follower

There is a strong case for business to widen its vision of leadership beyond a description of the actions, skills and personal qualities of the person occupying the leadership role by paying more attention to the characteristics of those being led. This re-examination of leadership should:

- Recognise that successful leadership is the outcome of the fruitful interaction between those who lead and those who follow.

- Explore in depth the role of the follower, drawing attention to its importance, value and potential contribution to the success of the team.

- Frame the leadership role so that expectations of the leader incorporate actions that serve to encourage the follower to play their role to the full.

- Release pent up energy and productivity currently trapped in paradigms of leadership that concentrate solely or primarily on the leader.

Leadership as a Process

Leadership can be seen to be a two-way interaction between those who lead and those who follow in pursuit of common objectives and tangible and observable outcomes. The quality of the interaction and its outcomes depends on the ability, skills, experience and motivation of all parties and their commitment to their common objectives and outcomes.

The Model

In this interactive model of leadership, leader and follower are two separate concepts, two separate roles. In a perfect world, they are complementary and not competitive roles. Both the leader and the follower make an active voluntary decision as to the extent to which they apply their knowledge, abilities and talents to meet the responsibilities associated with the role of leader or follower. Both the leader and the follower perceive forces acting upon themselves that encourage them to engage to a greater or lesser extent with each other to achieve desired outcomes. Neither party has a monopoly on the provision of knowledge, talent, effort or commitment. The greatest successes are recorded when both parties are most influenced by the forces that encourage mutual engagement and ignore or are little influenced by the forces towards mutual disengagement. At the highest level the interaction between leader and follower seems to occur with perfect mutual understanding and little or no apparent communication between the two parties. In the extreme power is the only factor which separates the position of the leader from that of the follower. Trust is the glue that binds the leader and the follower.

The Leader

The road to enlightenment on the leadership role is well travelled. In fact one could suggest it is more a super highway. Every guru has his/her own definition of leadership. Most of these definitions centre on the notion of a person taking actions that result in other people behaving in particular ways. Today's offerings pay special attention to the concepts of empowerment, vision, commitment etc. Bennis and Nanus[3] for example talk of leaders who:

- Invent and create environments that allow followers to meet their needs.

- Choose values and visions based on the key values of followers.

- Move followers to higher levels of consciousness.

- Help followers to generate a sense of meaning in their work and a desire to succeed.

After looking at the behaviours common to a number of successful leaders in the USA they determined that the key drivers of successful leadership were vision, communication, trust, persistence and self-management.

The Follower

In sharp contrast to leadership there is a dearth of writing on the art of following. The superhighway is replaced by the dirt track. While some authors make passing reference to it in their writings on leadership relatively few have focused on the follower as a key player in successful leadership. Even a cursory review of the field leaves one with the impression that "following" is behaviour not considered by leadership "experts" as worthy of special attention or serious examination. After all the follower is the person who simply does what they are told because they are unwilling or unable to play a more meaningful and decisive role in the team.

Developing an adequate definition of a "follower" is made difficult because the concept is seen to be trivial, obvious and lacking substance. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that following cannot be understood without reference to leadership. The following definition draws on the thoughts of Kelley[4], a major contributor to the literature on the role of the follower:

> *A follower is one who pursues a course of action in common with a leader to achieve an organisational goal. Effective followers make an active decision to contribute towards the achievement of the goal and demonstrate enthusiasm, intelligence, self- reliance and the ability to work with others in pursuit of the goal. Effective followers recognise the authority of the leader and limitations this imposes on their own actions, consider all issues on their merits, make their own decisions, hold their own values, speak their minds and hold themselves accountable for the consequences for their actions.*

In other words, effective followers, given the necessary information and room to move, can be trusted to take independent action to achieve a specific objective, subject to their receiving ongoing assistance and support to resolve issues beyond their spheres of competence and influence and to their receiving recognition for the work they are doing. It is important to note that while the behaviour of effective followers may be seen to be simply doing as they are told, their actions are the result of independent thought and decision making and would have been the same in the absence of direction from the leader.

Balancing the Ledger

Emphasising the importance of follower to the leadership process is not intended to deny or downplay the significance of the leader to the achievement of team goals. Rather the intention is to:

- Raise the profile of the follower and his/her interaction with the leader to the point where the contributions of both the follower and the leader are seen as integral to team success.

- Assist followers to fully understood and accept their role in the leadership process and to encourage them act in accordance with the demands of that role.

- Assist leaders to identify and implement management practices that encourage and permit followers to act in ways that realise the full potential of the role.

- Emphasise the importance of both leaders and followers to the achievement of shared objectives.

Followers Expectations of Leaders

Followers actively evaluate their leaders and in many cases find their performance below par. Often it is the limitations imposed by a leader that stops the follower from performing at their best. From the follower's viewpoint effective leaders embrace them as partners and are influenced by their words and actions. Effective followers chose to follow a good leader (regardless of whether their participation in the team was a matter of choice) and accept all the consequences of that decision including the limits to their actions imposed by the leader. In exchange effective followers want their leaders to share information, involve them in decision making and create working environments in which the efforts of followers are recognised, respected and rewarded.

Developing a Culture of Effective Following

Most organisations utilise teams of varying sizes to achieve particular goals. Solving major operational problems, developing new business ideas, implementing significant structural changes are only a few of the challenges that business has discovered are best handled through teams usually lead by an experienced person who is designated team leader. Some organisations have made a much greater commitment to team working through the introduction of self-managing teams responsible for producing major outputs of the enterprise.

It is our contention that regardless of the level of use an organisation makes of team based working there is much to be gained by them encouraging and endorsing "effective" following within the workplace. Strategies for achieving this outcome are discussed later in the following sections. Organisations that have a long history of team based working and who have regularly invested in leadership training could legitimately argue that they have developed a corporate culture that already encourages and rewards effective following.

A Useful Survey

We have developed a survey designed to assist organisations to test the extent to which their employees do understand the concept of effective following and do feel that their organisation encourages and rewards team members and leaders to behave in accordance with the principles and practices of the role. Organisations are encouraged to ask a sample of employees to complete the survey and to determine, based on the accumulated outcome, whether there are significant productivity gains awaiting them by actively endorsing and promoting effective following in the workplace.

Download the survey from our website.

Strategies for Promoting Effective Following

Organisations can foster a culture of effective following by adopting the following strategies:

- Adopt a management style based on the philosophy that successful leadership is dependent on actions of the leader, followers and the quality of their interaction.

- Communicate this philosophy of leadership throughout the organisation.

- Conduct training programs for all employees (including senior management) to inform them of the concept and practice of effective following.

- Conduct training programs for managers, supervisors, team leaders to educate them on how to encourage and manage effective followers.

- Build effective following into performance reviews for all employees.

- Reward and celebrate outstanding examples of effective following and follower oriented leadership.

Training Program

Training will be the key to the successful introduction of effective following within an organisation. Employees, many of whom will have received some training in team working and have experience working in teams and possibly leading teams, will need to be given the opportunity to explore the concept of effective following in some depth. By examining and discussing the concept they will have the chance to appreciate the full implications of adopting a different approach to the question of leadership in the workplace.

A one- day training program has been developed by Adrian Walsh & Associates to help business to achieve this outcome. The program could be self-standing or be a major section of a longer Leadership Development course based on the idea that leadership is an interactive process between the leader and the follower.

The specific objectives of the program include:

- To enable employees to explore the role of "follower" in the workplace and how the follower should relate to the leader.

- To underline the significant contribution followers make to the achievement of organisational goals.

- To enable participants to identify ways in which they can improve their performance in the following role.

Further information can be obtained by contacting Adrian Walsh & Associates.

Footnotes:

1. Australian Human Resources Institute; *HR: Creating Business Solutions, A Positioning Paper*, August 2003, P7-8
2. R.Kelley; *The Power of Following* Currency, Doubleday, New York,!992
3. W. Bennis and B. Nanus; *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge*, Harper and Row, New York, 1985
4. Ibid

For more information about the services we offer in relation to "Followership" or any of our other services, please call or email us here:

Tel: +61 (0) 2 6251 8943
Mob: +61 (0) 418 582 628
Email: workshops@adrianwalsh.com.au

Adrian Walsh & Associates