Leadership Development

Smart leadership choices

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Regardless of the main focus of change projects, leadership always comes into the picture: either as a supporting force of the organizational changes or as a competence needed for the future organization, and sometimes even as a hinderer of the planned changes. Leaders face formidable challenges and usually have several options to tackle the dilemma or difficulty. The co-existing options create a challenging tension leading to better solutions.

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Over the past 30 years, we have worked a lot with leaders: supporting organizational changes and developing present or future leaders of various organizations. Below, we will summarize the tensions our clients experience. Although these tensions and possible ways of solving dilemmas co-exist and the everyday situations are never black or white, we will formulate them in a way which will also express our belief about which side should receive more attention.

Leadership choices

1. **Authenticity over tools, drills and techniques**
   We often face two types of needs. First, to develop authentic leaders who lead by being present in a situation, by using themselves as instruments. Second, we work to develop leaders by giving them a series of tools and techniques which they could use to quickly fix situations they face. We see that after a certain amount of experience, the good leaders come to a point where they need to lead authentically from inside, without using quick fixes. At this point, they rather focus on the situation, on the needs of the colleagues and on their own inner psychological resources.

2. **Sense over objectives**
   Leaders participating in our advanced leadership development programs often claim that having a sense and purpose is much more motivating and mobilizing than objectives and KPIs. However, we often face the need for supporting leaders in setting tangible objectives. More and more of our clients realize that objectives and KPIs »make sense« only if there is an overall purpose of the activity.

3. **Starting over ensuring**
   One behavior clearly makes many leaders successful and appreciated in their organization: the courage to start a project without having a 100 percent complete roadmap. Starting and exploring enable quick learning, finding new information and making better decisions, while planning every little detail makes people stick to a plan that might collapse in the first minutes afield. This approach also demystifies the »I am not allowed to make a single mistake« mindset because when people are allowed

Motivation, engagement and wellbeing are more important for success than only money.

to make mistakes, it facilitates innovation and development.

4. **Commitment over money**
A CEO and guest speaker in one of our leadership development courses once explained how unheard and discouraged he had felt when his boss tried to mobilize him and his team by threatening that they would lose their bonuses in case they did not fulfill their targets. We share his believe that the motivation, commitment and wellbeing of the members of an organization are much more important for perseverance and success than (only) money-based motivators. We do not claim that financial motivators are not important, but we have experienced that they hardly fulfill their role without the commitment and dedication of the people.

5. **Emotions over rationality**
Emotions are a crucial resource for leaders, a direct connection to people's energies. Being aware of their own attitudes and feelings and sensing the feelings of colleagues is a crucial step in being fully present in critical decisions and in initiating action. Only thinking about or reviewing decisions is rarely enough: leaders may fall into the trap of over-analyzing, becoming overwhelmed and sometimes even paralyzed by the enormous amount of information they have to deal with.

6. **Teams over single heroes**
When a CEO we have coached took over his new position, he consciously focused on creating time and space to form his new leadership team. Twice a month, the team spent a day working on various strategic and operational issues in an external location. He believes that teams are able to do things differently and more efficiently than individuals. We agree. Single heroes can achieve a lot, but when they disappear, they often leave a team that still needs to grow. A team with shared leadership and responsibility usually has a more predictable way of ▶

> »The best leader is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and the self-restraint to keep from meddling with them while they do it.«
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> Theodore Roosevelt

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functioning and of handling challenges. The shared leadership approach also acknowledges the diversity of personalities, culture, experience and skills.

7. **Virtual over physical presence**
Today, virtual interactions dominate the physical ones. In our experience, being mentally and emotionally present is possible and crucial when interacting and leading virtually. Virtual leadership is not a matter of technology; presence is the crucial element. There are leaders who – in spite of being physically in the same place – are not able to be mentally and emotionally present, whereas effective virtual leaders succeed in establishing and maintaining a climate of trust and closeness to their team members despite the physical distance.

8. **Capability over seniority**
»It is capability that matters, not seniority,« claims one of the CEOs who we highly respect. Indeed, we experience that leaders become capable in their roles through quick, sometimes lateral career moves which somewhat mirror the hectic nature of the business environment. A seniority-based, hierarchical and linear leadership career does not ensure the success of a leader and thus, of an organization anymore.

9. **Situation over organization (and hierarchy)**
When a gaggle of geese flies, they rotate the leadership role. If they suddenly have to turn to avoid danger, whoever happens to end up as the first of the gaggle will take the lead. In the future, we will have more and more people who are prepared to take the lead and take over responsibility when needed; leadership will be shared throughout the organization. Collaboration adopted to the actual situation is key to moving on quickly and efficiently.

Although both of the options described can lead to better solutions, and both sides are valid in various contexts, we always position one option over the other because:
— We experience that one of the two options receives much more attention in the current leadership repertoire, or
— we believe that the future organizations will need more from that alternative, or
— we could see our clients' successes when they decided for one way or the other of dealing with a situation.

Develop highly qualified leaders

What is the future and the role of leadership development? Should it support some or all of the possible options? There is no clear answer to this. Sometimes our clients ask for drills and tools instead of support to lead from the inside. Sometimes the support needed depends on targets, timing and employee capabilities. However, if we are able to bring in the values and options we believe in, we are sure we can contribute to the future sustainability of the organizations and to the wellbeing of the ones that are deeply impacted by the quality of leaders at the various levels of organizations. ●