

Developing leaders sustainably

Tim Casserley explains why there needs to be a paradigm shift in how we develop leaders

Over the past two years we have been through a period of extreme economic turbulence, during which we have experienced an unravelling of some near-iconic financial institutions – an economic collapse, predicted by few, which put millions of people out of work.

While there is no doubt that the recklessness of the banking industry played a pivotal role in bringing about this crisis, our research suggests it was the culmination of a far wider *malaise* permeating current notions of how organisations operate, what leaders do, and how they are developed. We would go as far as to say that the existing paradigm of leadership is so profoundly implicated in causing the crisis that it has become totally discredited, and along with it the recommended ways of being a leader that pre-date the crisis, from situational leadership through competencies or values-based, authentic, level 5 and so on. To quote Einstein, we “can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them”.

At the heart of this thinking is the supremacy of shareholder wealth maximisation, and with it the idea that leadership is about ‘driving’, ‘re-engineering’ and ‘leveraging’ organisations in its pursuit. The implicit assumption underlying all of this is that businesses are like machines that can be controlled to bring about a desired set of outcomes. For those at the top of organisations, this illusion of control all too easily leads to feelings of omnipotence and grandeur. After all, if I am in control, what need is there to service the needs of others – be they customers, employees or markets?

Since organisations are like machines, it follows that human beings can also be atomised into component parts. As a consequence of this reductionist logic, leadership becomes little more than a set of competencies, and leadership



development an exercise in behaviour modification.

In our experience, few talent and leadership practitioners question the limitations of the prevailing paradigm concerning the purpose of companies, nor do they question the implications for what leaders do and how they develop. This is unfortunate as most of the assumptions underpinning the old paradigm of leadership and leadership development are now being rigorously questioned.

Businesses are increasingly seen as participants in a wider ecology, with responsibility for minimising their environmental impact and improving their contribution to social welfare.





Our research

Our initial research into personal and career sustainability, which started more than eight years ago, was published in a book by David Megginson and I in 2008¹, before the financial crisis reached its climax. This revealed the dynamics in the relationship between leaders and their organisations that can either lead towards long term, sustainable success or business failure and derailment:

- the dimensions of organisation culture that can influence more – or less – responsible approaches to career
- what successful leaders do – and don't do – that sustains them and their careers over the long term
- the patterns of behaviour associated with pursuing work unsustainably.

Then, between October 2008 and September 2009, we ran an experiential programme in sustainable leadership for WNS Global Services, Novartis, PwC, McCann Erickson, BG Group and UBS. It confirmed our findings and provided deeper insights.

We believe that our findings form the basis of a paradigm shift in the way we think about how leaders are developed. It is an approach that centres on leaders exercising a duty of care for their own sustainability as well as that of the wider business and the society of which they are a part. It is as concerned with leaders learning the lessons of sustainability – paying attention to their own 'healthily selfish' needs as a prerequisite of effectiveness – as it is with increasing their performance.

We call this new paradigm “developing sustainable leadership”. We use “sustainable” on various levels:

- the **personal** level of sustaining personal psychological and physiological health
- the **organisational** level of sustaining a work environment in which people are enabled to flourish and realise their own potential in the service of organisational purposes that they see as worthwhile and sufficiently congruent with their own sense of personal purpose
- the **sociological** level of playing a responsible part in the broader community
- the **ecological** level of sustaining the environment.

The current paradigm of leadership development is not, in our experience, informed by a sustainability agenda. It is informed by the idea that leaders have the potential to get bigger, stronger and better over time – a philosophy of growth taken to extremes by the influence of positive psychology. And it is also informed by social Darwinist notions that only the fittest will survive, that some people are naturally superior to others and only money really motivates. The world of leadership development mirrors our society and economy in being firmly rooted in 1980s free-market neo-liberalism.

Our research shows that performance derives from an integration of three core processes:

- 1 reflection on action (learning through doing)
- 2 psychological intelligence (having a clear sense of personal purpose and an awareness of personal assumptions and motivations)

3 physiological well-being (effective management of stress and sufficient self-care).

This last process is all but ignored in most development programmes, or seen as a 'nice to have' add-on, while our research suggests that it is of equal importance to the other two.

Importantly, it is the integration of these three core processes, followed by their engagement with the culture of the organisation, which constitutes effective leadership development and generates sustainable leaders, and is more likely to create sustainable organisations.

Reflection on action

This orientation is gaining ground over traditional teacher-centric development activity. The idea that managers learn mainly through reflecting on their experience was pioneered in the 1950s and 1960s by Professor Reg Revans in the form of "action learning". While it had an initial flowering, it was not universally taken up in the field of management development because it is not so easy to plan and control as programmatic training; however, it has re-emerged in various forms, such as action research, action inquiry and, of course, coaching, as traditional forms of 'training' are increasingly called into question.

The challenge here is 'reflection'. It is one thing to act, and management is largely associated with 'doing'. It is quite another to reflect seriously on action and hence to learn. What we are talking about here is leaders finding the time and the space to regain a sense of perspective, and chew over their reflections on what they hear from others. This inevitably means giving up old leadership assumptions about being 'in control' and instead taking the time to reconnect with those around them who have unique insight into what is really happening in the business.

This is still somewhat counter-cultural in the frenetically high-performance cultures of most organisations, and it is the inculcation of this practice of reflection in, and on, action that is, in our view, one of the hallmarks of sustainable leadership.

Psychological intelligence

This more recent focus is currently largely addressed through the use of psychometric instruments that purport to provide 'profiles' of personality, preference, aptitude and so on. What they do not substantively address are two core psycho/sociological questions:

1 Personal purpose If we ask a leader 'what is your purpose?', the initial response will probably be incomprehension. If you press him to think about what kind of society he wants to create for future

generations, what kind of organisation he wants to create for his employees, what effect he wants his organisation to have on the environment and so forth, he may wonder what all of this has to do with his job as a leader. We suggest that it has everything to do with his job as a sustainable leader, and particularly that responsible leaders need to think about their personal purpose as opposed to unthinkingly conflating it with the commercial aims of the organisation or their own narrow commercial interests. This capacity to think about personal purpose is another of the hallmarks of sustainable leadership

2 Motivation In our experience, all motivations have a shadow side, or neurotic potential.

For example, the desire to succeed is clearly a valuable source of energy but it can tip over into a desire to succeed for its own sake, to the exclusion of all other considerations and at the expense of others. The desire to manage others is similarly a valuable motivation until it becomes an end in itself, and so forth.

Such 'neurotic' motivations usually have their roots in early experiences and are never sustainable in the long run. They frequently lead to individual burn-out and/or create toxic work environments. Helping leaders develop deep insights into their motivations is another hallmark of sustainable leadership.

Physiological well-being

This focus is rarely addressed and is barely discussable in some cultures. But there is overwhelming research evidence that neurotic motivation (invariably unconscious), often combined with over-identification with the organisation (lack of sense of personal identity), causes unsustainable physiological stress levels. Long-term consequences are sleep problems, alcohol dependency, burn-out and, of course, increased likelihood of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and so on.



The existing paradigm of leadership is so profoundly implicated in causing the crisis that it has become totally discredited

How leaders develop: old vs new paradigm

Current paradigm	Sustainable leadership
Concern with performance	Concern with human sustainability as prerequisite for performance
Identify skills or competencies	Foster and integrate core individual processes of reflection on action, psychological intelligence and physiological well-being
Modify leaders' behaviour based on these competencies	Negotiate engagement between core processes and culture of organisation
Leadership is drilled into people via off-job training	Leadership emerges from reflection on action in dealing with real-life adversity
Focus on the development of one-size-fits-all set of competencies; no attempt to adapt these to leader's specific context and challenges	Focus on the quality of the relationship between the individual leader's core processes and the culture of the organisation

Paying systematic attention to physiological well-being is another hallmark of sustainable leadership.

Engagement of the core processes with the culture of the organisation

Our research amplifies the importance of organisational context in the development of leaders. The culture and work conditions of the organisation are the most significant of these contextual influences. By 'culture' we mean the norms and habitual ways in which 'things are done around here'. 'Work conditions' refer to the demands made of individuals, the time pressures set upon them, the nature of organisational control systems and procedures, and the habitual tenor of work relationships.

It is the interrelationship between these contextual factors and the core individual processes that determine the effectiveness of leadership development. In fact, we would go further and say that effective leadership development is concerned with the negotiated engagement between the core processes outlined above, and the culture and conditions of the organisation.

When derailment happens it is either caused by the fixed neurotic patterns of the individual leader (described above), or a negation of the personal in favour of the demands of the organisation, based on what we believe is the unsustainable assumption that leaders are, *ipso facto*, obedient servants of the corporation and, therefore, must bend to whatever it

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References

- 1 Casserley T, Megginson D *Learning from Burnout: Developing sustainable leaders and avoiding career derailment* Butterworth-Heinemann (2008)
- 2 Psychological Consultancy Ltd *Decade of the Dark Side* (2009)
- 3 Zimbardo P G *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* Rider (2007)

dictates. This belief is reinforced by some of the literature on derailment – particularly that which takes an exclusively individual psychological perspective².

In our experience, such an approach risks stigmatising the individual and exonerating the organisation.

But we are equally clear that the individual leader must play an active role in determining how he engages with the organisation. In essence, this means he needs to define for himself to which aspects of the culture and conditions he feels committed. To what does he sign up? With which aspects is he willing to live? And what does he seek to change?

This portrayal of the leader as a powerful agent in communion with the organisation is the final hallmark of sustainable leadership. It challenges the idea that leaders can be developed effectively in isolation from their social context, and rejects deterministic notions that leaders are purely at the mercy of powerful forces in their environment³. It makes the relationship between the organisation and the individual leader central to the effectiveness of leadership development.

Summary

The table above summarises the key characteristics of the new paradigm of leadership development we are calling sustainable leadership, and shows how these are different from conventional approaches.

Uncharted territory

It seems to us that the time is right to examine some of our cherished beliefs and assumptions about developing leadership. So much of the old paradigm of leadership has been discredited by the events of the last two years. We can only go on pretending that it is business as usual for so long – sooner or later the old paradigm will lead us into the next crisis.

There has never been a better time for our notions of leadership to move towards a larger, more encompassing perspective on the world in which we live, and to adopt a sustainable approach to the development of those who lead our organisations. **TJ**