

The Leadership Challenges

All.... are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,
tied in a single garment of destiny...

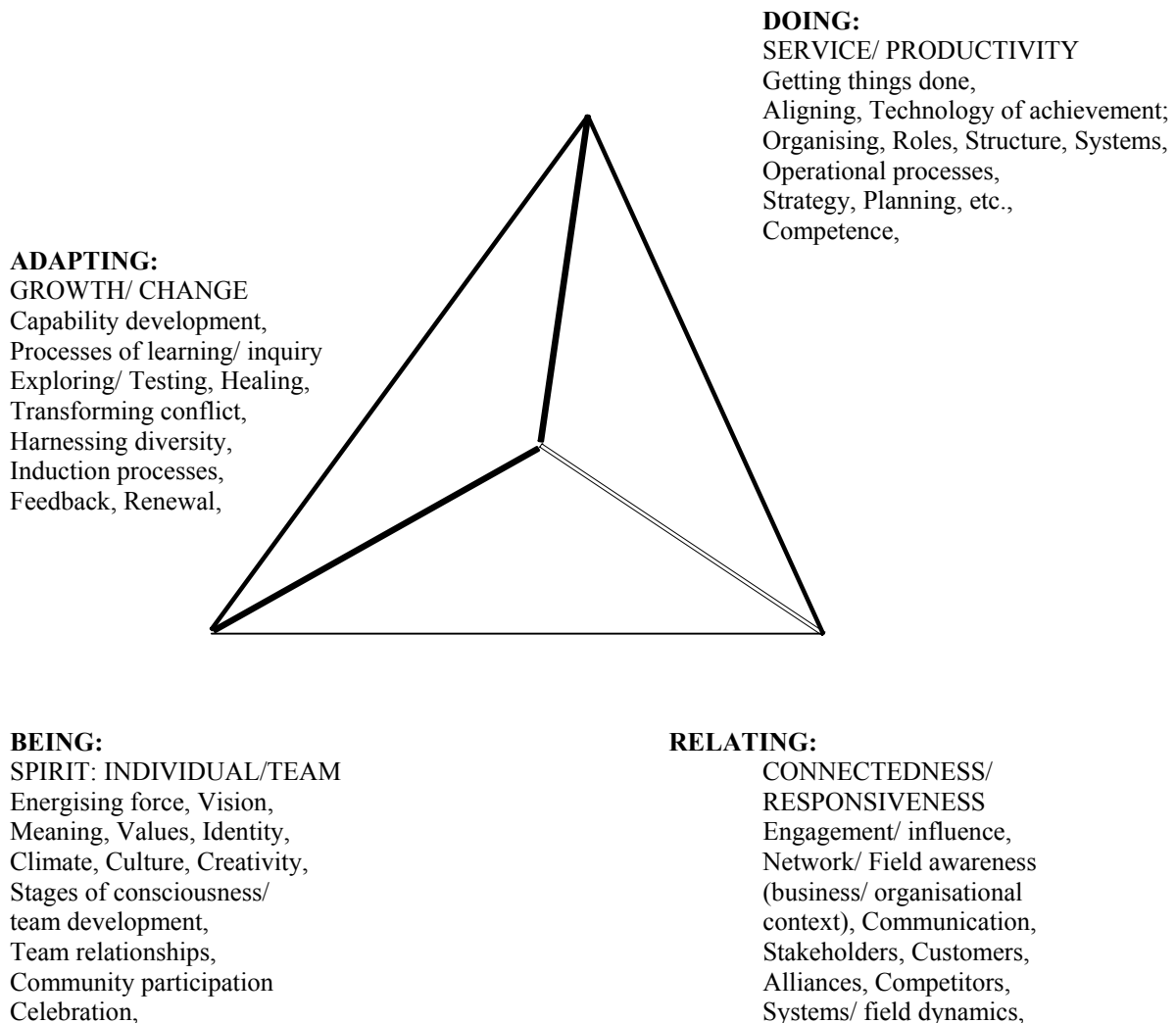
I can never be what I ought to be until you are
what you ought to be, and you can never be
what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.

This is the interrelated structure of reality.

Martin Luther King Jr.

This paper is an exploration of the challenge facing SBU Leadership teams and provides a framework against which specific challenges can be inquired into and addressed. A three dimensional pyramid is offered as a way of reflecting the different dimensions of the leadership challenge. A range of questions to help initiate an action inquiry process follows a brief overview of each aspect of the challenges.

The pyramid below is an attempt to capture the nature and interdependence of the leadership challenges facing the SBU Leadership Team. Each point of the pyramid represents one aspect of the team challenge – each aspect being interdependent with the other three. Excellent Leadership attends to all four, emphasising each as and when appropriate. Neglect of any one of these aspects will lead to unsustainable or low-level business performance.



Leadership is the art of facilitating all four interrelated dimensions. Realisation of all four demands a range of talent rarely found in any one individual. It requires collective leadership – a leadership partnership - from a team of leaders.

The Leadership Challenges

The leadership challenge can be understood as four interdependent challenges:

- ◆ **Being** (spirit)
- ◆ **Doing** (getting things done)
- ◆ **Adapting** (learning and changing)
- ◆ **Relating** (connecting and responding)

The purpose is to map out the territory of leadership so we can begin the process of action inquiry into SBU leadership. This is a starting place not the end product or prescription. While the model is mine, much of what is written is based on leadership and organisational literature.

Many leadership models prescribe a set of behaviours or strategies without establishing the territory or the goals. Others assume that economic goals or the bottom line are the key result areas. This model does not prescribe how to lead. We need a model that widens the focus to deal with the complexity of the challenge without overwhelming us with the detail.

Being *Spirit*

It is hard to define spirit but we can feel its energy when it is present. It could be described as emergent meaning and purpose which inspires and energises us to extraordinary accomplishment and service. It enables us to transcend our personal needs and limitations, to connect up with our fellow human beings and to the mystery of nature.

We often talk of some one being a free spirit to convey a sense of being elevated, unburdened, freedom loving, full of vitality, wonder, imagination, possibility and optimism.

Spirit is often linked to what Maslow called meta-motivation or transpersonal values, (e.g. equality, justice, liberty, etc.), the pursuit of which carries people beyond personal needs, uplifts and inspires extraordinary service and self-sacrifice.

Organisational spirit can rejuvenate and draw us toward extraordinary performance. Vail's (1989) research confirms the link between spiritedness and high performance teams, but anyone who has been a member of such a team will know this intuitively.

In contrast, people in many organisations experience isolation, dispiritedness, low morale, and lack of initiative. Teams don't quite 'gel'; there is little 'flow' in team dynamics. There is little by way of inspiring vision or purpose. Such organisations do what they need to get by but never excel. They could often be said to have lost their spirit.

Organisations where well-being of spirit is continually neglected often suffer a kind of malaise, reflected in degeneration into turf wars, power battles, damaged relationships and a cult of individualism – big troublesome egos. The 'busy-syndrome' and inauthenticity prevails. Neglect of spirit is often at great cost in terms of employee satisfaction, turnover and ultimately performance.

Spirit cannot be commanded but it can be discovered (rediscovered), watered and nurtured. Paradoxically any attempt to energise or bring about change in such an environment through the use of positional or coercive power – however benevolent – is prone to failure. Dispirited teams and organisations, like people, need healing to reconnect or retrieve their spirit. This kind of leadership relies on metaphors more akin to the healing and learning than ones of power, command and control.

Culture, values and norms are often the nearest organisations come to exploration of spirit. There are a wide variety of tools and techniques available for monitoring and assessing values, norms and culture.

Another way of exploring the Being dimension is through exploring developmental stages of individual, team and organisation. The claims of developmental theory are highly relevant to the development of worldviews capable of managing complexity and therefore to leadership development. Torbert suggests there is a relationship between the state of development of the leader and the level of development to which that leader is capable of moving the organisation. Equally the stage of development of the team or organisation will have an

impact on what it is like to work in, what it is capable of achieving, its capacity to adapt, and the nature of its relationships with its members and stakeholders.

Adapting

Growth and Change

Organisations can be understood in different ways. The predominant organisational metaphor of the twentieth century was that of the machine. Each part or person had its function and was controlled by other parts, usually in a hierarchy.

The limitations imposed by the static nature of such structures became exposed as organisations were forced to change and adapt to changing business, social and cultural environments. These weaknesses were further exposed by disappearing spans of hierarchical control, increased competition and the need for greater productivity.

New metaphors were needed to reflect the evolution of organisational process and structure – ones that could reflect the adaptivity, fluidity and more open boundaries needed to thrive in a competitive environment. Successful organisations have now been described as ‘complex adaptive systems’ in an extension of the ecological metaphor.

More recently complexity and chaos theory, which are becoming increasingly influential in our understanding of science and organisations, suggests that matter and indeed organisations are best understood as self-organising systems.

Haifetz and Laurie, Harvard experts on leadership theory and practice, identify “defining the adaptive challenge” as one of the core leadership functions. This can only be defined by understanding not only the environment in which the organisation currently exists, but also the scenarios in which it will have to compete and be successful in the future.

The capability to grow and adapt cannot be assumed. In recent years our understanding of how individuals, teams and organisations learn and develop has grown enormously. Learning has to be built in to the very fabric of the organisation, not just something we do when we are in trouble. Action Inquiry processes, developmental stages, the art of thinking together, learning organisations – these are just some innovations that can be used to improve adaptive capability.

Learning from experience, action-inquiry and collective learning demand a wider range of skills than for most academic learning. Adaptation ends with successful action or achievement rather than with just insight. Because of our early conditioning and learning experience, we may need to reframe our understanding of learning before we can achieve the collaborative inquiry and change needed for successful organisational adaptation.

Doing

Service and Productivity

Getting things done tends to be the greatest preoccupation of leadership. Yet too much focus on ‘task’, to the detriment or neglect of the other leadership challenges can be counterproductive. Misuse of power for short-term achievement, is all too common and has damaged the sustainability and long-term performance of many companies.

Organising enables people to achieve far more collaboratively than they could on their own – even by adding together many individual contributions. The quality of organising depends on the excellence of leadership. Organising can no longer be achieved by rigid structure or procedure and leadership can no longer rely on processes of command and control for long-term success.

For example, procedures can provide the illusion of protection against the unknown and can easily become a cover for incompetence. Inappropriate procedures are the single biggest creativity-killer in any organisation. They often take on a life of their own and once introduced, are extremely difficult to eradicate. The value of procedures needs to be constantly reviewed in light of strategy and impact.

Organising needs to be a dynamic, flexible process, which serves the vision and strategy of the company. To achieve this we need new ways of organising but more importantly we need new ways of thinking about organising. Gareth Morgan proposes metaphors as a means of creating organisational form and structure that can address the many, new and often paradoxical requirements of meeting business and social challenges.

However, he explains there can be no single theory or metaphor that gives an all purpose point of view, and there can be no simple “correct theory” for structuring everything we do.

Our thinking and organisational potential can become trapped by the images we hold of ourselves, our teams and organisations. Our behaviour, our leadership and the very way in which we carry out our business are heavily shaped by the systems (structures, spatial architecture, communication processes, etc.) within which we operate. Liberating our thinking by testing multiple organisational metaphors can enable us to generate organisational processes and forms fit for the human spirit and capable of realising the corporate dream.

Organising requires work and role definition; matching role with preferred work preference, capability, etc.; and the resources – physical, financial, technology, and so on. The last century has seen extraordinary strides in extending operational capability. However as social ethos and employee expectations change, the challenge of aligning purpose, vision, strategy, operations and outcome, becomes more critical than ever. Continual alignment enhances organisational legitimacy, provides continuity as well as ongoing renewal and keeps the organisation focused on its mission. These are core functions of leadership.

Continual quality improvement, or action inquiry, is both a method for maintaining the necessary alignment for extraordinary performance and a means of adapting and renewing them when necessary.

Relating

Connectedness and responsiveness

The world is interconnected and interdependent. Reality is what we create through our engagement with others and with events.

Two forces or human tendencies that seem to be universally in operation are *agency* and *communion*. Agency (getting things done) is extremely well developed in western culture and organisation. Communion (relatedness, membership, unity) is more developed in eastern and Asian culture and organisation. Too much agency leads to fragmentation, alienation, and loss of spirit. Too much communion leads to loss of individual identity, subservience, suffocation, and lack of direction.

Relationship can be viewed from a variety of perspectives. However we define it (probably the wider the better), an awareness of our field or environment - how we construe and relate to it - is critical to business success.

We exist and do business within a field or web of relationships. Our connectedness creates what we are, and also the information we receive or to which we have access. The cult of individuality, with its desire for self-sufficiency and autonomy, in westernised cultures blinds us to the fundamental and critical nature of our relationships with others and our environment. Our responsiveness and success depends primarily on our connectedness, how (as individuals or organisations) we process the information we receive and how we act as a result. Connectedness, information flow and processing are the “life blood” of business and organisational success.

“Global consciousness” depends on the receptivity and connectedness of the leadership team. The fact that there is a team communicating together rather than one individual increases the potential for connectedness and the quality of awareness. A team will have a greater range of relationships and a greater variety of lenses through which to perceive and gather information. Information and information flow is the core to relation, connectedness and responsiveness.

Organisations spend huge amounts of money gathering, processing, transforming and disseminating information. Information problems are often the single biggest hindrance to effective relating and organisational performance. Information processing, dissemination, and the ability to make use of information can be seen as a measure of ‘organisational intelligence’, which is a key determinant of success.

The attitude of leadership is fundamental. Do they believe that information should be freely available? Information will find its way to where it needs to go when the conditions are suitable for it to get there. Withholding information often leads to resentment, false assumptions, and bad decisions.

There is no one formula for ensuring that effective information flow, but there are bottlenecks and blockages that can be removed. Rigid structures and formal communication channels make it almost impossible for any new initiative to be adopted. Information that is only allowed to move along pre-defined channels loses its richness, becomes sterile and is often out of date by the time it arrives where it is needed. An organisation retaining the traditional notions of power and authority will fail in its attempts to allow information flow freely.

Interrelationship of dimensions

These different dimensions or focal points of the leadership challenge are inextricably interdependent. For example to excel in getting things done requires vibrant spirit and morale. Competitive edge (relating) requires extraordinary ability to learn and adapt to the business environment. Excellence in product development interrelates innovation (adapting), making and testing (doing) and engaging potential customers and clients (relating). It is the interplay of all four which is most likely to achieve the corporate dream in a sustainable manner.

The leadership team will need to act in a way which can interrelate all four dimensions. We are proposing a process of action inquiry as the core approach to integrate all four and to generate the kind of leadership needed for success. (see accompanying introduction to Action Inquiry). Action Inquiry will enable the leadership team to define the priority leadership challenges against a backdrop of this framework and both inquire into and put into action the kinds of leadership strategy and behaviours needed to deliver SBU and organisational vision and purpose.

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SOME CORE INQUIRY QUESTIONS

The following questions are designed to help begin inquiry into the four elements of the model. The questions can often usefully be applied with some adaptation, at individual, team or organisational levels. Select questions as appropriate to team circumstances. Categories can be addressed in any order but it is best to keep in mind that they are all interdependent in practise.

Being

- Do people experience an empowering sense of identity and belonging?**
- How would you characterise the predominant level of energy/ passion you have for your work ?**
- What is your “high dream” – what makes your heart sing/ inspires extraordinary accomplishment?**
- To what extent are the team’s espoused values lived in action on a day-to-day basis?**
- How does the organisation heal itself following damaging events?**
- Is achievement recognised and celebrated appropriately?**
- How is hope maintained during times of difficulty or hardship?**
- Is your organisation fit for the human spirit?**
- Of what do you feel most proud in work, and do others appreciate it?**
- To what extent do your values resonate with those of your team and organisation?**
- Do you have a satisfactory work life balance?**
- What is the implicit/explicit, social/ psychological contract between stakeholders?**

Adapting

- What are the key adaptive challenges you face currently?**
- How do you identify these challenges?**
- How would you characterise and describe your stage of development?**
- Are the learning strategies you utilise adequate i.e. do they deliver the required changes as needed?**
- Does your organisation have embedded learning culture?**
- How does your team regularly inquire/learn together?**
- How do you test out your assumptions and beliefs?**
- Is leadership accepted as a valid and worthwhile area of inquiry on a day-to-day basis?**
- How are mistakes and failures treated in the team?**
- How are mistakes or errors treated in your organisation?**
- How is learning recognised and rewarded?**
- Does the team seek out difference and harness diversity as a resource for adaptation?**
- What is the evidence of single, double, triple loop learning in your team?**

Doing

- Are you clear about your goals and how to achieve them?**
- Do you have the resources and support needed to accomplish them?**
- Does the achievement of your team exceed the sum of individual capacity?**
- Are mission, vision, strategy, operations and outcomes sufficiently understood and aligned?**
- Is there a shared understanding as to how resources are to be mobilised?**
- How does the organisation assess and monitor and enhance performance?**
- Are tasks, roles and responsibilities appropriately and efficiently distributed and monitored?**
- How effective is communication in the context of task achievement and collaborative working?**
- Does your team have the type and level of capability needed to achieve targets?**
- How does your team cope when things do not go according to plan?**
- How is power and influence used and how does it impact on performance over time?**
- Is decision making timely and effective and are appropriate people involved in the process?**
- How does the team balance the need for both freedom and order?**
- Is there appropriate planning and flexibility in implementation?**
- Can the team effectively manage the reward/risk ratio?**

Relating

How in touch are you with key stakeholders in the organisation/ business/social environment?
Do existing social networks complement or undermine formal organisational structures?
How open are the boundaries of your organisation?
Is information processing used to inform or to build and maintain power positions?
Who is allowed to represent or gather information on behalf of the organisation?
How well does your organisation make use of diversity (culture, gender, class, age, etc.) in accessing, assessing and framing business information?
How skilful is your communication and are there communication bottlenecks in the organisation?
How free do people feel to speak openly and frankly about personal and organisational issues?
Can you think of an appropriate metaphor for the team's internal and external relationships?
How is dissonance and conflict handled within your team?
How does your team decide what information is needed, gathered, shared, processed?
Do you engage outsiders in clarifying purpose, vision and strategy of your team?
How does your team obtain external perceptions of your team's value and performance?
Do you have sufficient and timely information to do your work? Where does it come from?

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