### **THOUGHTPIECE 2**



# CHARISMA OR KARMA? Some recent thinking on what makes great leaders

The leadership industry has grown up over recent years hand in hand with the quest to locate the essence, the "vital spark" that ignites a leader's capabilities. Perceived wisdom seems to suggest that if we can find it and then distil it, it can be kept in bottles and dispensed to those lucky enough to attend a leadership programme or read an inspirational book. But what is it that separates authentic leadership excellence from mere competence? Can we store it somewhere and then teach people to emulate it?

It was thought for some time that you needed to be a larger than life character to be a truly great leader. You needed to be ruthless and hard hitting with an ego bigger than a planet! It was these people, usually men, who would become the gurus and the thought leaders, adding to their personal fortunes by publishing their gems of apparent wisdom. And we were eager to learn; to be inspired; to try and do it their way. Jim Collins¹ was one of the first to refute this. His extensive research proved that the key ingredient in an organisation becoming great (not just good!) is having a *Level 5 leader*, an executive in whom genuine personal humility blends with intense personal will. This finding was countercultural because we had come to believe that great organisations (not just companies) had big personalities at the helm – Jack Welch, Lee Iacocca, Winston Churchill, Rudy Giuliani.

Collins' research showed that the truly "good-to-great" companies were consistently led by Level 5 leaders. People with capability at all 5 levels of leadership who at level:

- 1. have a blend of talent, knowledge, skills and good work habits
- 2. work effectively with others in a team setting
- 3. organise people and resources towards the successful completion of predetermined objectives
- 4. energise commitment and rigorous pursuit of a clear and compelling vision, setting high performance standards

#### **AND**

## 5. build enduring greatness through an apparently paradoxical combination of personal humility and personal will

So what characteristics does Collins ascribe to these 2 key elements?

#### **Personal Humility**

- ❖ a compelling modesty, shunning public adulation, never boastful
- calm and determined, relies on standards not charisma to motivate
- channels ambition into the company not the self; sets up successors
- looks in the mirror not out of the window to apportion responsibility for poor results

#### **Professional Will**

- creates superb results
- shows unwavering resolve to produce long-term results however difficult
- makes clear the commitment to creating an enduring company
- ❖ looks out of the window not in the mirror to apportion credit for successes

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Clearly it takes more than just a style of leadership to guide an organisation to "greatness" and its well worth reading Jim Collins' book for a greater insight into his well researched ideas.

The focus for this ThoughtPiece is on leadership and what makes great leaders so it's interesting to compare and contrast what Collins has defined with some recent work from Robert Quinn<sup>2</sup>.

Quinn appears to support Collins' definitions of a Level 5 leader arguing that the guru approach, where you try to emulate the behaviours of others, is not a sustainable course of action. Leaders need to enter what he describes as the *fundamental state of leadership* and you can only do this by understanding your own qualities, values and capabilities not by trying to copy someone else. Most of the time we function in the *normal state of leadership*, this is our comfort zone-there is no great stretch involved and it usually reproduces what already exists.

To inspire others to improve their performance we must find a way to move ourselves into the fundamental state. It is only when we are firmly ensconced in this state that we will be in touch with what it takes to develop those around us.

- ❖ Firstly we must recognise when we have been in this state before. At some time we will have experienced this when we have faced crisis (not necessarily at work), and achieved a successful outcome. Knowing that we have operated at this level before gives us the confidence that we can do it again before we step from the comfort zone into the challenge zone.
- ❖ Then we need to analyse our current state and compare it with our experience of being in a fundamental state.
- ❖ Then by asking ourselves the *Four Transformative Questions*, and acting upon the answers we give, we can make the positive change.

#### QUESTION ACTION

AM I RESULTS CENTRED? Get out of your Comfort Zone

Create Ambitious Outcomes

AM I INTERNALLY DIRECTED? Challenge the Culture

Clarify your Core Values

Stand-up for what you believe

AM I OTHER FOCUSED? Put the needs of other individuals and the team above

your own

Offer Support

**Build Relationships** 

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AM I EXTERNALLY OPEN? Learn from the Environment

Seek 'Feedback', Networking possibilities and

'Feedforward'

We recently used these questions, and the resulting focus they create, as the "check-list" for personal development in an intensive leadership programme. Small groups were each facilitated by a ChangeMaker coach and each participant was encouraged to take the opportunity for 1:1 coaching with their team tutor. As the pressures of the exercises and team experiences built through the week we could see people moving in and out of normal state, confronting their comfort zones, and trying new behaviours. We now had a way of challenging the course members to be true to themselves, a framework to understand where their focus goes under pressure, and a model to guide changing behaviours to help them to feel what it can be like to be on the top of their leadership game:

"when they act from their deepest values and instincts not just tapping into these fundamental qualities during a crisis, but doing so at any time in a conscious frame of mind."

ThoughtPiece 2 compiled by Andy Neal

**References:** (Both available from Amazon.co.uk)

Jim Collins1:

Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't

(October 2001) Publisher: Random House Business Books: ISBN: 0712676090

Robert Quinn<sup>2</sup>

Building the Bridge as You Walk on it: A Guide for Leading Change

(May 2004) Publisher: Pfeiffer Wiley ISBN: 078797112X

And Harvard Business Review July/August 2005