

are we missing the purpose of leadership?

written by Eugene Hughes CEO, artgym

a bit of background

Recently I joined a group of academics, psychologists and leadership coaches in a discussion on the psychology of leadership and was struck by how much we focused on the mechanics of leadership. The more I explored this idea, the more I questioned whether contemporary leadership development theories and practices are over-emphasising how to lead – underscoring the importance of influence, alignment, coordination and more recently collaboration skills – as opposed to why we lead. Leadership is a highly complex phenomenon and the history of humanity has proven our need and desire for it. But what exactly is the purpose of leadership? In our thinking about leadership are we focusing too much on the how to lead without sufficient emphasis on why we lead? In this article I question whether we are neglecting the innermost kernel of leadership – the purpose of leadership – and the impact this has on how we educate and develop leaders.



Leadership must be driven
by a sense of purpose.

buddha and the native americans

To create a wider perspective on the purpose of leadership, I'd like to refer to two stories from our past. The first is the story of the 7th Century Indian King, Siddhartha. When Siddhartha saw his people's pain and suffering it made him question the true quality of his comfortable life. He experienced what we might nowadays call a mid-life crisis – or what turned out to be his mid-life awakening. The once content King left his palace on a quest for meaning. After a long journey of suffering he seated himself under a sacred fig tree and vowed never to arise until he found the truth. After 49 days of meditation, Siddhartha finally reached enlightenment and was from that time known as Buddha. Buddha's new found wisdom gave him the agency to spend the rest of his life travelling and teaching the path to enlightenment.[1]



The second story comes from the nature based tribes of America. When young warriors returned home from fasting in the wilderness, as a part of their rite of passage from boy to man, the elders asked them three questions:

- Who went out?
- Who has come back?
- What gift do you bring back to your people?

It's this third question that speaks to the inner most kernel of leadership – to its purpose. Fundamentally leadership is about the betterment of our people and our planet. The young warrior's gift was discovered by going on a journey that facilitated a deeper, inner journey – a journey of self-discovery. By going out into the wilderness, the individual went on an inward journey and their vision began to expand. Their newly discovered gift became the source for the young warrior's actions. On their return, the experience transformed from a state of being to a state of doing which shaped the warrior's actions in the world.

contemporary leadership

The reason I reference stories from a pre-industrial age is to highlight where our contemporary leadership theories and practices may fall short. The psychologist van Vugt defines leadership “broadly [as] a process of influence to achieve coordination between individuals for the pursuit of mutual goals.”[2] For me, this definition captures a common position that is used in contemporary leadership education and development. It is a definition that promotes the mechanics of leadership, the ‘how to lead’ and fails to acknowledge the inner most kernel of leadership – its purpose.

It is my belief that leadership is more than coordination; leadership is about betterment – to create betterment for people and our planet. Yes, coordination skills can be very important to learn, but should they be the primary focus for educating and developing our emerging leaders? Should our leaders just be asking themselves “how do I coordinate people towards a goal?” Or should our leaders also be asking “what gift do I bring to people and our planet?” Of course both questions are important. However, I believe the purpose question must be primary and the coordination question, secondary.

contemporary terminology

Even the terms Collaborative Leadership[3] and Transformational Leadership,[4] that have emerged recently are descriptive of the mechanics of leadership as opposed to the deeper purpose of leadership. Although they speak to the being as opposed to the doing of leadership, I also struggle with morally charged terms like true or authentic leadership,[5] as they do not capture the essence of leadership by avoiding describing its purpose. It is not enough for the leader to be good, or true or authentic. Leadership is a state of being and doing that requires the leader to not just know their gift, but how it actively supports the betterment of people and our planet.

purposeful leadership

In the spirit of exploring the idea of emphasising the essence of leadership, a term I offer for discussion is Purposeful Leadership. By Purposeful Leadership, I refer to a state of being – in mind, body and spirit – that creates the agency for our doing – our actions. Purposeful Leaders know their gift and how that supports the betterment of people and our planet. Purposeful Leadership goes beyond the notion that leadership is a position that must sit at the top of an organisation or at certain points in its structure. Purposeful Leadership can exist across the whole organisation, beyond the traditional boundary of a leader-follower dynamic. Purposeful Leadership can exist within the mind, body and spirit of every person who wants it to do so. It is a state of being that informs the doing – where the leader allows the reason why they lead to influence how they lead and not the other way around.

conclusion

If we are to emphasise purpose and purposefulness, this represents a new paradigm in how we approach leadership education and development. As the ancient Tao of Leadership advises us “your influence begins with you and ripples outward. So be sure that your influence is both potent and wholesome.” A contemporary interpretation of this in the context of Purposeful Leadership would take into consideration the psychological state artgym takeaway: Are We Missing the Purpose of Leadership? Is contemporary leadership terminology addressing the essence of leadership? Does the Leader possess the psychological readiness, as well as the necessary skills and competencies to lead? This psychological readiness runs deeply beyond cognitive psychology to a level where important questions of our personal and collective existence and evolution must be considered. The Purposeful Leader must journey inward to the inner most kernel of his or her own psyche to find their elixir, their gift, to pass on in the betterment of the people and our planet.

references

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contact

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artgym ltd
info@artgym.com
+44 (0)20 7785 7256

s101 holywell centre
1 phipp street
london ec2a 4ps