

Leadership Update

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Special points of interest:

- Leaders connect people with their own life purpose, spirituality, energy, society, organization resources etc.
- Unconditional respect and toxic behaviour are mutually incompatible. A person exhibiting toxic behaviour is totally lacking in unconditional respect. A person exhibiting unconditional respect cannot behave in a toxic manner.
- Leaders always show unconditional respect.

A Question of Respect

Only a few weeks ago, quite close to where I live, a 17 year old boy committed suicide on his way to school.

Two weeks ago, following a disciplinary meeting with the Principal of a well known and very successful State High School, a girl sent a text to her father saying "I hate my life. I'm such a screw up."

Last week, in a discussion with a Principal about student results, I was told that the school always treated its students with respect. I asked for an explanation of respect. The response was one I found amazing. "I can't define respect," was the reply, "but I know it when I see it."

I don't know what caused the suicide, and I'm not

suggesting the school was to blame, but my sympathy is with the family in their loss and as they deal with an incomprehensible tragedy.

I don't know what actually transpired in the meeting the girl had with her Principal but my concern is that the girl obviously experienced something that shattered her self confidence.

I do know that respect can be defined as ensuring a person is never demeaned, denigrated, "put down", treated with sarcasm, ridiculed, bullied, harassed, or subjected to any other experience that lowers their self esteem or in any way at all makes them feel that they are "not ok". In turn, this means that a key component of leadership is the competence to deal with discipli-

nary situations in such a way that the person being disciplined knows that they are always totally acceptable as a person even when their behaviour is unacceptable.

In Australia we seem to be an increasingly violent society—often including self harm. The media seems full of stories of violence in the home, on the streets, in schools, and in workplaces. Some of this is physical: some is psychological or emotional. The form of the violence is irrelevant. The fact of the violence is tragic. The effect of this violence includes an alarming increase in youth suicide and of feelings of hopelessness in those who are the victims.

One significant contributing factor to the problem is that too many of us don't seem to be able to explain respect.

Can't explain ... probably don't understand

Christopher Meyer, in an article entitled "*Leadership can't be taught: only learned*", argues: "*a leader uses only one tool: him or herself. Like any other tool, the more we know the tool's potential and limitations, the*

more effectively we can use it. Leadership is therefore dependent on self-knowledge and awareness."

I suggest that the Principal who couldn't define "respect" was lacking in self-

knowledge and awareness. To me it seems that an inability to define, or even describe, "respect" indicates a lack of knowledge as to what respect really is—and that is central to many of today's societal problems.

Abuse is rampant

When I speak of violence or abuse, many people seem to assume I am referring to sexual abuse. This is not the case. Sexual abuse is but one form of the many types of violence that can permanently harm people.

The Child Protection legislation in Australia makes it clear that “*Harm ... is any detrimental effect of a significant nature on the child’s physical, psychological or emotional wellbeing. It is immaterial how the harm is caused.*” Under this clause it is possible to make a very strong case that the girl who sent the text message

to her father was the victim of abuse—especially when it is recognized that the girl had a pre-existent emotional disorder for which she was receiving treatment. I understand this was known to the Principal. Again, the Child Protection Legislation Amendment Act 2003 makes it clear that any disciplinary action must be taken into account “*the age, maturity, health ...*” of a child.

It seems to me that our society has a wide acceptance of behaviour that is anything but conducive to good lead-

ership. “Reality” shows such as *The Apprentice* seem to indicate that the public “disciplining” of people who “fail” is what should be done by managers who desire to get the best out of their people.

In our schools we may have outlawed corporal punishment in the 1980’s on the grounds that it is physical abuse but we have continued to turn a blind eye to behaviour that may be psychological and/or emotional abuse in schools, work, and society for too long.

Perhaps some of the results are now seen in our crime statistics.

Do not spike, bend, fold or mutilate

I am old enough to remember when we had to use punch cards in order to use a computer. (And as a student I remember the trauma associated with dropping a pile of punch cards on the way to the card reading machine!) On these cards there was the injunction “*Do not spike, bend, fold or mutilate*”. The message was that every card was unique—it had its own particular message encoded upon it and anything that might affect this coding would result in error messages and computing problems.

It seems to me that we need to hear that message again when it comes to dealing with people.

I have remarked before that a negative mark of recent years is that we have moved from living in societies to living in economies. In other words, we have moved from living in a world where relationships are important to a world where what happens to and with people is considered secondary to the economic factors surrounding the organization, area, or country.

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In a society where the influx of information and the speed of change is increasing at almost an exponential rate, the need for people to receive consideration as individuals in their own right is more important than ever before. Unfortunately, for too many of them, they are grouped in socio-economic categories—and we wonder why we have problems.

Respect is Central to Leadership

The person who wrote to me recently saying: “... this is not, in my experience, a situation where teachers are expected to give ‘unconditional respect’ as you suggest, regardless of the behaviour of students. ...” clearly does not really understand leadership—and may not understand as much about management or teaching—as they

think.

If there is one single thing that stands out to me after some 40 plus years in a variety of leadership positions, it is that there can **NEVER** be a situation in which respect is put to one side. I have also learned that the more serious and/or flagrant the behavioural issue which lead to disciplinary ac-

tion, the more critical it is that the person being addressed receives unconditional respect. Unless there is a very clear distinction between the person (who is always acceptable) and the behaviour (which may not be acceptable) the probability of any disciplinary intervention being successful is very low.

Without respect there is no leadership.

Conditional versus Unconditional

And perhaps this is the root cause of many of the societal problems we face today.

Our society pays a lot of attention to conditional respect—if you do what I want then I will reward you. While this is very effective with animals—it is, after all, the key component of behavioural conditioning—it is nowhere near as effective with people who have the ability to see what is going on and to recognise the potential for manipulation that exists.

Research from a variety of sources shows that the critical conditions that enable people to grow and develop—to minimise the probability of antisocial behaviour and to maximise the

probability of them becoming emotionally strong, creative human beings are:

They feel safe

They feel respected

They feel believed in

They are listened to

When dealing with people's issues and concerns, to create these conditions is quite easy—all it requires is that we understand and practice some very basic leadership behaviours: behaviours that can be learned. These behaviours are:

- Powerful questioning—questioning that focuses on the speaker and their thinking rather than on the detail in the issue or problem they are facing

- Observational listening—listening that focuses on the speaker with the purpose of reflecting back to the speaker what you see and hear
- Optimistic listening—listening with the belief that the answer will emerge from the speaker.

These three behaviours create the conditions in which problems—even the most serious disciplinary ones—can be resolved in a way that enables growth. The tragedy is that they are not the behaviours we see from leaders in schools or the workplace—the results of this failure are so often seen around us—the sorts of tragedies and events with which I started this update.

Leaders always show unconditional respect.

Toxic Behaviour

In *Leaders: diamond or cubic zirconia* I stated that a mark of a true leader was the willingness to apologise to other people when you were in the wrong. About a week ago I was talking with a senior executive in relation to possible legal action being taken against one of their managers. The response amazed me. “Oh no,” she told me, “an apology isn't on the cards.” There was a clear implication that for the manager to apologise would mean a loss of face and might undermine her authority.

One key sign of unconditional respect is the willingness to apologise.

A Sydney author, Anne Miles, (**Email: acceptablebehaviour@gmail.com**) has recently written a book entitled “*Rules of Acceptable Behaviour*”. In this she talks of “toxic” behaviour rather than abusive behaviour because she is trying to make the point that much of what we do has, either

wittingly or unwittingly, a toxic effect on those with whom we interact. She sets out patterns of behaviour that we can use in order to avoid toxic behaviour.

There is no doubt that the Principal of the well known and highly respected State High School had no intention to cause emotional or psychological harm to the girl who sent the text stating “I hate my life. I'm such a screw up.” But, as the old saying goes, “the road to hell is paved with good intentions”. The Principal's behaviour was toxic and, as such, it was the total opposite of what should be shown by any leader.

Unconditional respect and toxic behaviour are mutually incompatible. A person exhibiting toxic behaviour is totally lacking in unconditional respect. A person exhibiting unconditional respect cannot behave in a toxic manner.

The Executive who I was helping work

Leadership requires that we apologise to people, no matter who they are, when we are in the wrong

through the issue of possible legal action against one of her managers, was more concerned with what she considered to be good order and authority—the organisational hierarchy and power structure—than she was in providing an apology as part of the process of removing toxic waste.

As is well known, the problem with toxic material is the long term effects that sometimes only become apparent years after the toxic event occurred—the current problems relating to asbestos are but one example. I believe that toxic behaviour is no different.

As leaders we need to be aware of what we are doing and the possible impact this might have on our followers at some undefined future time. There is no excuse for toxic behaviour—that it may be unintended is totally immaterial.

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The lesson for leaders

It can be argued that over the centuries—to the end of the 20th century—society has moved from tribal to feudal to managerial. The 21st Century has seen the managerial mindset come crashing down. We may have talked about leadership and teams in the later 20th century but our organisational and societal structures remained largely the same as they were 30 years before—hierarchical power structures in which the few controlled the many.

Today it is clear that things must change. The global financial crisis was caused by people who were interested primarily in themselves—and they continue to oppose anything that might threaten their vested interests in power and money. Yet the continual move to “outsourcing” or “contract labour” in which one person might actually work for several organisations simultaneously or, serially, may have 30 or more

“employers” over their working life, makes it clear that the old order, if not actually dead, is certainly terminal.

This is the age of the virtual organisation. This is the age in which young people are saying “if the job doesn’t engage me, I’ll go elsewhere”; “if the boss tries to get ‘heavy’, I’ll suggest ‘sex and travel’ and then move on.” There is a rebellion against power structures and the immediate availability of knowledge and data by such media as the internet means that even the last resort of power—information—is less available to those in authority than ever before.

People are demanding to be treated as individuals; to be treated with respect. The organisations that fail to recognise this—be they educational, government, business, religious, social, or whatever—are doomed to ex-

inction.

The 21st century requires leadership—and leadership requires behaviours that are securely based on the foundation of unconditional respect.

There are many who will oppose this shift. We will see from these increasingly toxic behaviour that resorts to some form of fundamentalism—a demand that people submit to a supreme authority and do whatever is demanded in order to placate that authority. And we will see this eventually destroy itself.

There are others who will embrace the new world order. These are the ones who have a future. These are the ones who will make the future. These are the ones who will bequeath to their children and grandchildren a better world.

These people are leaders.

Are you a leader?

How and In What Way Can We Help You?

Douglas G Long & Associates provides the following services:

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Team Development Workshops & Facilitation

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