

# **Why would anybody *want* to be led by you? – The case for Emotional Competence amongst Leaders**

## **Introduction**

There has been a rhetorical question posed many times to existing and aspirant business leaders; “Why should anybody be led by you?” The question encouraged introspection and some self assessment of personal leadership capability. This article, by inserting just one word, *want*, in the question demands an answer from a different angle. As a result of research carried out for the Welsh Government, the Centre for Excellence in Leadership & Management Skills produced a report entitled “The Impact of Leadership & Management Development on Organisations” (Kennard & Meliou 2012). Whilst gathering the data for the report it became clear that the way those people who were actually being led perceived their leader had an enormous impact upon their own work place performance.

This paper describes the nature of this shift in awareness, the new working relationships that may need to be created to move forward positively in the difficult operating conditions that face many organisations and the development opportunities available to leaders in order to increase their competence in this area.

## **Background**

During 20 years of delivering leadership and management development programmes in both the private sector and HE I have identified recurring answers to the question of why should you lead people, they include:

- Because I am the MD/CEO
- Because I own the company

- Because I am the best qualified/most intelligent
- Because I am the biggest
- Because I have been here the longest.
- Because I am the oldest
- Because my father/mother owns the company

Further questioning showed that they were very much in the 'just get on with it' leadership style. The notion of an obsequious workforce, blindly following orders with a 'one employer for life' mindset was commonplace amongst these leaders, they felt that their staff were beholden to the company and should be grateful for the employment on offer to them.

However the advent of a mobile workforce, freely changing employers in order to secure better pay and conditions has forced a rethink. Now all employees can, and frequently do, change jobs and career paths. The concern for many organisations is that their most valuable members of staff, their high performers, are regularly tempted by offers from competitors.

When Kellerman (2008) said "Followers the world over are getting bolder and more strategic – which is why leaders who dismiss or discount them do so at their own peril" she issued an alarm call to those leaders who lead in isolation and with little or no regard for those they lead. This recognition of followers forms the basis for the investigation of leadership self awareness in organisations described in this paper.

## **Why would someone want to be led by you?**

Warren Bennis (1989;1) summed up leadership in his comment "like beauty, it's (leadership) hard to define but you know it when you see it". The complex issues that surround how we judge good and bad leadership have tended to centre on organisational outcomes. In this paper we intend to look at more nebulous but not less important criteria.

What makes one person follow another? It could depend upon the person being led as much as the leader. There are those who will happily follow anyone with no questions or reservations but there is a rapidly growing number of people who are more critical of their leaders. These iconoclasts have a completely different mindset from previous generations who merely followed orders. They aspire to leadership and the transfer from operative to leader is now more readily available and more commonplace than ever before due to the widespread availability of adult education. They demand a more inclusive, aware & emotionally competent style of leadership and will change their employer to accommodate this desire.

For those with an interest in leading in a more engaging style there is a wide range of development opportunities available. For those wishing to acquire or define their skills in this area programmes on such topics as Emotional Intelligence & Transactional Analysis may be appropriate. Goleman (1996) considered the difference in emotional and rational responses to situations, he found that although rational responses were, by their very nature, better thought through, emotional responses carried a far greater sense of certainty. He felt this was due to a "more streamlined, simplified way of looking at things" (Goleman, 1996;291).

As emotional responses are, according to Goleman, also quicker than rational ones, leaders can be seen as intuitive and emotionally competent when responding emotionally to a situation. Followers can feel that their leader gives a 'gut feeling' response and these responses humanise them rather than the more robotic 'Let me think about it & get back to you' answer many leaders rely on. When considering Emotional Intelligence, McCool (2008;77) said " In today's world, the heart matters as much as the head.....It's (EI) the recognition that one person can't do it all, that leadership means building and earning trust and motivating others."

In an article in the IOD magazine's January 2012 issue, the Chairman of Bell Pottinger, Kevin Murray, discussed what makes a good leader. Under the heading, 'softer skills' he said that emotional engagement is key to the success of leaders but that many of them are highly rational and focus on the numbers which is neither emotionally engaging or inspiring to employees. In a global survey by the Institute of Leadership & Management it was found that the most important characteristic when recruiting senior leaders is the ability to understand, motivate and inspire others.

In order for leaders to really understand and control their own emotional state, they should have an understanding of the psychological underpinning of how they interact with others and how that interaction can drive their own emotions. A theoretical and practical approach to more emotionally competent leadership is Transactional Analysis (TA). TA is now over 50 years old as a concept and after going through something of a hiatus in the 70s and 80s is now regarded as having a legitimate place amongst leadership communication techniques.

According to Hay (1996) the TA approach is a whole person approach where participants learn new ways of behaving whilst gaining an understanding of their own

internal attitudes and emotions. This awareness gives individuals an element of control when dealing with others in both social and work settings. Many leaders now acknowledge the impact that other people's inadvertent words and actions can have upon their own emotional wellbeing. Alongside this is the awareness that their own unconscious responses to situations may impact upon their staff's perceptions of their own workplace worth. Participation in Ta development programmes can enable leaders to be more controlled in their interaction with others and also can give an insight into what drives others to act and react in the way they do.

### **Leadership Life Positions**

Hay,1996 described life positions as a set of windows through which we look out at the world.

|                                  |                              |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>I'm not Ok, You're OK</b>     | <b>I'm OK, You're OK</b>     |
| <b>I'm not OK, You're not OK</b> | <b>I'm Ok, You're not OK</b> |

In terms of emotional competence, the I'm Ok, You're OK is the perfect window, it is here that the leader recognises what they can and cannot do, and also what others

can & cannot do. The acceptance of the fact that a leader can have areas in which they are not better than others gives a rounded, less antagonistic and confrontational leadership style.

A leader with the I'm not Ok, You're OK life position will feel inferior to others and may develop strategies to create situations where they are perceived to be "better" than those around them. The danger here is that as these situations are constructed and hence false, they will be seen as worthless as a measure of leadership competence and will be discounted with a decrease in the value of the leader.

The I'm OK, you're not Ok leader feels that they are superior in all things to those they lead, this will allow them to treat people as badly as they wish as, in their world, other people have no worth. These leaders may be perceived as bullies or autocrats and will engender very little follower loyalty. Their environment could be characterised by low retention and high absenteeism.

I'm not OK, You're not OK allows a leader to drift along in a sea of despondency. They feel that they do not have the answer and that there is no-one to consult because no-one else has the answer either. These leaders cannot motivate their staff and will fall apart under pressure.

Many of today's workforces have had an experience where they were led by someone either not capable of leadership or capable but untrained. Either of these scenarios can be the result of inappropriate promotion procedures within organisations, how often do we see the best salesperson being promoted to Sales Manager? It appears that some organisations hold a belief that the transition between high performing operative and competent leader/manager is automatic. This is the ultimate sink or swim situation and one that with the minimum of

forethought can be avoided. It is human nature to be defensive when faced with situations beyond our capability to resolve and so it is unsurprising when some newly promoted leaders behave badly towards their team of followers. Whilst this behaviour can be rectified by appropriate support and development opportunities there are some managers who fail to act appropriately.

In an ESRC report on ill treatment in the workplace, the behaviours of managers and the impact upon employees was investigated, A quote that is particularly relevant to this paper is “there are managers who do this kind of thing (ill treat staff) against the wishes of their employer, but there are certainly managers who ill treat employees because they think this is what their employer wants them to do. In either case, it is up to the leaders in an organisation to mandate everyone with managerial responsibilities – at any level- to treat everyone fairly and with respect” (Fevre et al 2011; 35)

### **Conscious Competence Model**

When considering emotional competence it is appropriate to apply Gordon’s conscious competence model to the stages of leader development. People develop competence only after they recognise the relevance of their own incompetence in the skill concerned.

The grid below shows the 4 stages of what has also been described as the transition from novice to expert;

| Competence                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Incompetence                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>3 - Conscious Competence</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the person achieves 'conscious competence' in a skill when they can perform it reliably at will</li> <li>the person will need to concentrate and think in order to perform the skill</li> <li>the person can perform the skill without assistance</li> <li>the person should be able to demonstrate the skill to another, but is unlikely to be able to teach it well to another person</li> <li>the person should ideally continue to practise the new skill, and if appropriate commit to becoming 'unconsciously competent' at the new skill</li> <li></li> </ul> | <b>2 - Conscious Incompetence</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the person becomes aware of the existence and relevance of the skill</li> <li>the person is therefore also aware of their deficiency in this area, ideally by attempting or trying to use the skill</li> <li>the person realises that by improving their skill or ability in this area their effectiveness will improve</li> <li>the person ideally makes a commitment to learn and practice the new skill, and to move to the 'conscious competence' stage</li> </ul> |
| <b>4 - Unconscious Competence</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the skill becomes so practised that it enters the unconscious parts of the brain - it becomes 'second nature'</li> <li>the person might now be able to teach others in the skill concerned, although after some time of being unconsciously competent the person might actually have difficulty in explaining exactly how they do it - the skill has become largely instinctual</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                         | <b>1 - Unconscious Incompetence</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the person is not aware of the existence or relevance of the skill area</li> <li>the person is not aware that they have a particular deficiency in the area concerned</li> <li>the person might deny the relevance or usefulness of the new skill</li> <li>the person must become conscious of their incompetence before development of the new skill or learning can begin</li> <li></li> </ul>                                                                     |

To illustrate leader behaviour in each of the areas I have provided examples that have been taken from various research and teaching activities undertaken both personally and by members of my staff.

## 1. Unconscious Incompetence

Characterised by inappropriate comments & actions, the leaders are unaware of their incompetence, and cannot see that they have done anything wrong, Comments when a member of staff informed their leader of bereavement have included:

“It comes to us all”

“Well they had a good innings”

“Oh dear..... have you got that report done yet?”

In these cases the leaders involved were completely unaware of the effect of their comments upon their staff in general and not just the individual involved. The question is why they were in a leadership role, the answer may be found in the answers shown in the background section of this report.

## **2. Conscious Incompetence**

Characterised by a dismissive attitude to what was described as “tree hugger” behaviours. For many leaders the pain of the learning process far outweighs their own perceptions of the benefits of new patterns of behaviour. One leader was aware that his interaction with his staff was not as effective as it could have been but dismissed any possibility of change as he just wasn’t “into all that stuff” After a long and at times painful process he is now aware of the negative effects of his actions and has changed dramatically.

## **3. Conscious Competence**

Characterised by an active desire to practise new techniques, leaders at this stage of their development will be regularly referring to notes before interfacing with staff and will need support from others at this stage and also mentor/coaches. The leader described in 2 above took small, considered steps to change his behaviour pattern, with definite improvements in staff relations

## **4. Unconscious Competence**

These leaders are characterised by being “well thought of” by their staff. They are capable and competent, comfortable in any situation; they seem to get things naturally right. They possess an ability to know when things are not right in their environment and instinctively how to address the situation.

Perhaps a secondary question that leaders could ask themselves is “would I want to be led like this?” This reflective, self critical process may, if answered honestly, provide leaders with a base from which to hone, or alter, their actions when dealing with others.

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