

The Heart of the Matter: Reflections on Leadership

by Richard Pearson

A recent Leadership Development program we conducted involved 22 global managers from a recently merged multinational firm. This was a very powerful program in which the participants came together three or four times, in different locations, over a six month period, both in a large group as well as in smaller “business challenge groups” of 4-6 participants each. Each small group was assigned a “coach” who worked with the team to support them in their process as well as to provide just in time feedback about their leadership styles.

Within the business challenge groups the managers shared a current personal challenge with the other members of the group (all peers from different parts of the company) and the peers coached each other in the resolution of their challenge.

A common theme that emerged was how so many people, especially after September, are reevaluating their careers and what is important to them. Suddenly the idea that the company will look after you is gone. Why work such long hours – “even my boss cannot protect me”.

As the trust built, (which happened quickly) people began to discover more and more about each other. It was amazing how much our team had in common. An especially significant event for us when one member challenged another to let go of her “fear” and discover her true self. This led another member to share a poem by **Marianne Williamson**, often credited to Nelson Mandela as he quoted it in his Inauguration Speech in 1994.

Our Deepest Fear

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

This poem became very significant for our group. So much so that the group used it as the basis for their mini “workshop” that each group led for the others in the large group at the end of the program.

The workshop started by one of the members reading the poem and then having small groups discuss the poem in the context of the challenge the group had been working on which, in our case, was “How to create a culture of innovation within the company?”

Each of the participants wrote their own poems about the one thing they could do personally to make a difference in the company. The results were impressive – at the end of the program, many people commented on the “power of the poem” and the importance of integrating both the heart and the head at work.

What I believe is significant about this is that most managers would likely think that poetry has no place in business or in a leadership development program. And yet, as we talk about engaging the “hearts and minds” of our people I often feel that more emphasis is placed on the mind rather than the heart. Current management literature talks about developing people as “human assets”. Many consulting firms are now setting up “human capital” divisions. We all know that people are our most valuable resource – and yet, I am not sure that current efforts are truly engaging people where it matters – the heart, not the mind.

On a recent flight from Hong Kong to Vancouver, I happened to sit next to the regional managing director of a well-known multinational. As I shared

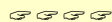


some of my experiences in developing high performing organizations, he asked me what are the most common issues other CEOs faced. When I mentioned that it always came down to how to really engage and motivate people he nodded with a knowing smile.

He happened to be reading Jack Welch's book entitled "From the Gut". This, for me, is likely to become one of the most influential books of our day. In it, Welch, talks about his experience in transforming GE over the last 20 years. At the end of the day, it all comes down to people. The essence of Welch's philosophy is a commitment to hiring the best and supporting them with the resources they need to do their jobs. Hand written notes, pizzas and face to face dialogue, asking tough questions, were all at the heart of Jack's management style. He calls it "From the Gut" – I call it from the heart.

People are people. Everyone who shows up to work in your company was once a five year old. We all have fears, hopes and dreams. The key, in my opinion, in good times and especially in difficult times, is to recognize that. Engage your people, speak from the heart, be willing to show a little vulnerability and you will be going a long way to becoming what I call an "authentic leader". This really is the heart of the matter.

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The power of your strengths

By Isabel RImanoczy

A few weeks ago, while working with a group of European executives, we received the complaint that the



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Learning Coaches did not give enough "tough feedback", and that there was more to observe than positive aspects in their behavior.


We are aware that cultural patterns influence people's preferences, and we knew that the influence of Calvinism could have played a role in this. However, it led me to give further thought to this request, and as happens many times, a very interesting article fell into my hands – just in time.

It was a short piece written by Robert Kaplan (HBR March 2002), where he indicates that while everyone wants to target the weaknesses to improve them, the real challenge is in knowing the strengths. Knowing the strengths is not an easy task, because **many problems arise from our strengths** – and we have to manage them. "Take one brilliant and well-respected (...)executive that my colleagues and I interviewed. Though his peers and his staff acknowledged his intellect in a variety of ways, he remained steadfast in his belief that he wasn't exceptional.(...)The problem that arose from this misjudgment was that he could be abrasively impatient. (...)This destructive behavior intimidated his staff and deprived him of their full contributions."

Interestingly, **our strengths are only a border away from our weaknesses**: Take a moment and think of someone around you . Find one really positive aspect of that person – and now try to check if that very same virtue doesn't become sometimes a problem. Is she so well organized? Does this become a headache when flexibility and improvisation is required? Is he specially talented in social skills? Does this become a problem when he has to be silent and listen? Is he extremely creative – and afraid of expressing his wild ideas in order not to shock others?

Now get one step closer. Think of yourself : What are one or two of your strengths? And when do they become an obstacle for your effectiveness?

If you have gained this awareness, think back how important it truly is to have a full inventory of your own strengths, so that you can learn how to calibrate them – as Kaplan puts it : "...how much is enough- and tone it down or ramp it up as needed".

Don't shy away from what you have: try to master it and gain balance. That sounds like a bigger challenge than dealing with what we are not. 

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