

The Leader Within

We all have a leader within us who might in certain circumstances want to hide away, and in others burst forward and lead with confidence. In this article, Dr Trevor Bentley hopes to encourage you to search for your leader within or, if you have already found him or her, to look for ways to enhance your effectiveness through knowing yourself better.

I believe that we all have the capacity to lead when circumstances arise where we feel equipped to take the lead, through a combination of knowledge, skills, experience and desire that is unique to each one of us. You may already have had such an experience, and you might have felt surprised that others followed willingly. These are what I call 'moments of leadership'.

I would like to share a few thoughts with you regarding my own beliefs about leadership. Leadership is not necessarily what leaders do. In fact many people in the role of leader rarely display any true leadership. Secondly, true leadership is most noticeable because the person displaying it seems to be largely unaware that they are doing so.

True leadership is inspiring because the person leading is inspired, and others willingly follow their lead out of a sense of respect and belief that what the leader is doing is the right thing to do. Whether the action of the leader is impulsive, thoughtful, the result of careful analysis and discussion, or collaborative, the primary aim is for the common good. In essence, true leadership is selfless.

When we wish to develop and grow, and to change how we see the world and operate within it, it is natural to look beyond ourselves to learn from and to emulate others. This can create a dichotomy for the individual. As Beisser says, "He is constantly moving between what he 'should be' and what he thinks he 'is,' never fully identifying with either". This idea of being more who I really am, rather than who I think I am, or want to be, is the 'paradoxical theory of change'.

When I first met the paradoxical theory of change it sounded interesting and I liked the message it gave out; that it was possible to simply be more of myself and all would be OK. At this point, I didn't understand the depth and complexity of what seemed to me to be quite a simple idea. I liked and embraced the idea that I was 'good enough' as I am.

But here is the primary question – who am I?

Knowing Yourself

The paradoxical theory of change states that we change when we become what we are, not when we try to become what we are not. I have worked with so many leaders who have struggled when striving to be who they are not, and who find the idea that it is enough for them to be themselves, both appealing and a relief.

Of course one problem with searching for myself is I might not like what I find.



No matter how open and unafraid I become, there are still parts of my experiences that remain hidden from me. Much of what is hidden is related to episodes in the past that I have found demeaning and humiliating and that have generated feelings of regret and shame. These are experiences I don't want to revisit and do so only in situations where I feel well supported and understood.

I cannot change what has happened to me in my life and what I have learned from my experiences. However, I can embrace my history and experiences as part of me, and acknowledge that they have played a vital role in forming the person I have become, and am becoming.

In reality, we are not a single 'self', we are each a multitude of selves, each being representative of how the people we meet experience us.

I recently chaired a meeting of the board of trustees of the charity for which I work. There were 14 people around the table. I am sure that each of the 13 others experienced me, and have experienced me, differently over the time that I have known them. There were in effect, 14 Trevors present in the room, each of their versions of me, and my own version of me.

Not only would my colleagues have experienced me differently, they would also have experienced me through the filters of their own life experiences, their preferences and prejudices. In other words, a highly personal and subjective knowing of me. But unless I am aware, or seek to discover how others perceive me, I will fail to learn about myself.

Awareness

Through my five senses I receive the messages that vibrate from everything and everyone around me. The only way I can avoid this process is to close down my senses, to become sense-less. When this happens the messages stop flowing and I have little awareness of what is going on.

Without a sharpened awareness, my actions can become an automatic reaction to what is happening, as if I am on autopilot. It is possible to exist this way and many people do. However, it is not an effective way to get what I want out of life, or to serve others.

A far more effective way to operate in the world is to maintain a 'switched on' approach, ie all senses in fully sensitised mode ready to receive and process all signals.

We are all equipped with an awesome array of senses for maintaining a high level of awareness of what is going on around us. Our senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste) are essential for our survival and allow us to function adaptively in the environment in which we find ourselves at any given moment. The way we use our senses to feed our awareness can be experienced in three zones.

Outer Zone (Out There)

Which is where we make contact with our outer world through the use of all our senses. This includes our awareness of our environment and other people.

Middle Zone (in Here)

This zone includes all our thinking processes and what we imagine and fantasise about.

It is interesting to notice how when a team leader or facilitator pays attention to themselves and their own needs, their presence seems to diminish.

Inner Zone (in here)

The inner zone is where we feel and experience our emotions and bodily sensations.

By paying attention to all three zones we can heighten our own awareness, so that we become a highly tuned instrument assessing what is going on, and able to use this knowledge to help us build the relationships we want.

Context

All relationships happen in particular situations or contexts that are constantly changing.

Every situation and every moment is unique. I have never been in exactly this situation at this moment ever before. I may well have experienced similar events in familiar surroundings and for a moment I might imagine these as the same context in which I have made contact before. Though the situation might seem similar, it is not the 'same' context. When I find myself in a familiar context I usually follow patterns of behaviour and interactions that I have observed to be appropriate, expected, accepted and/or effective on previous occasions. I might even unconsciously slip into autopilot and not notice the subtle variations that distinguish this moment from previous ones.

When I find myself in a new and unfamiliar situation, a context that I have no previous experience of, I tend to be fully switched on with all my antennae out. I have no previous pattern to rely on, so I have to 'wing it'. It is likely that I will be highly attentive and experimental with my reactions and



when people are placed in 'solitary confinement'. Those who have had such an experience report that, 'it is the lack of contact that is worse than anything they could imagine'. Their sense of self becomes so diminished that they question their very existence. As COVID-19 continues to affect all our lives, it is a poignant reminder of the importance of contact when we see the effects of a lack of it on the residents of care homes, whose physical and mental deterioration seems to be exacerbated by the lack of contact with loved ones.

Life's Experience

Our actions in the present moment are dependent on all our past experiences and how they have influenced who we are. Our lives are packed with experiences and learning; some we have sought out and others have just come upon us. This amalgam of experience and learning is what Kurt Lewin describes as our 'lifespace' (Kurt Lewin, 1951) or our field. It encompasses everything and includes physical and psychological phenomena, or everything we see, touch, hear, taste, smell and feel in the emotional sense, and our experiences.

Everything we think and do, and everything we experience, shapes and conditions our lifespace. We cannot experience our world other than through our lifespace, which is what we have become and are becoming; it conditions how we see the world and influences all our actions.

As time passes, our innate and learned abilities, values, beliefs and attitudes in the world grow, develop and change as we meet new demands and experiences, and so our lifespace with all its history grows and develops.

Feeling Confident and at Home

When we are in our personal comfort zone we have a natural confidence. Our lifespace equips us to respond to events with a comfortable familiarity.

I describe this as 'leadership fit', and is something that happens for some and not for others. When appointing or electing people into leadership positions, efforts are made to choose those who seem to fit the role they will be taking on. Job descriptions often list attributes and qualities that are being looked for, but bearing in mind how little those appointing or electing really know about the persons lifespace, it is a very hit and miss process.

We do not need a particular set of attributes to be a leader. In fact, studies of great leaders of the past have shown just how different they are. When researchers look for similarities to try to answer the question – 'What makes a great leader?' they are bound to find some similarities, but what seems to have been missed is the extent of the differences.

Yet reading biographies and autobiographies, what is striking is the way that leaders emerge at the point where the current field conditions match their lifespace. It is as if all their lives have been in preparation for this moment, which of course they have, though often not intentionally. When we find that space where we fit we can be present in the fullest sense of the word.

Presence

Presence is an almost magical quality that we are aware of, but which we cannot manufacture. You cannot deliberately decide to 'have presence'. You can behave and dress so as to be noticed, but being noticed is not the same as having presence. Paradoxically,

responses, learning as I go, what seems to be working for me and what doesn't. Such occasions can be exciting, even scary.

Now imagine treating every moment and every event as a new, never before experienced situation, which in reality it is.

Of course it is not necessary to go to great lengths to make familiar situations seem and feel different. They are different – so perhaps all we need to do is be aware of the differences and draw other people's attention to the differences, ie increase our own and other people's context sensitivity, including when we meet others.

Self and Other (Contact)

I need contact to reinforce and extend my sense of myself. When I see myself in the mirror of the other person's response to me, I learn about myself. I need contact to feel seen and accepted and to build a sense of belonging. During the current COVID pandemic many of us have experienced what the loss of contact means.

At first meeting, ie first contact episodes, we are usually cautious in offering or demanding anything. We enter into our contact carefully responding and questioning. If a balance is maintained the contact continues. If there is an imbalance or a lack of equivalence, the contact will cease as we drift apart. Paradoxically, by sharing the awareness of an imbalance, balance is usually restored.

As the relationship develops, each succeeding contact episode has the potential to increase contact, and for each person to be able to give and take more from the contact.

Being deprived of contact is used as a form of punishment

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the more you behave in a way 'designed to be noticed' the less presence you have.

Presence is both Physical and Psychological

Physical presence arises when people meet and are aware of each other. It may be through physical closeness or through sensory connection. I see you and/or I hear you, and immediately feel drawn to connecting with you. Some physical or emotional reaction is stirred by your presence.

Psychological presence is the mind and heart connection, where two people in a relationship feel drawn together by the invisible thread of each other's presence.

At the present time as COVID-19 runs riot and we move from one lockdown to the next, we are meeting, certainly as groups, through online systems such as Zoom. As I do this, I am noticing that my sense of presence of myself, and those I am meeting on screen, seems much reduced.

My presence is increased with individuals and groups when I use my awareness to pay attention to the people I am sharing the experience with. Noticing and sharing how I am experiencing this moment, and inviting others to do the same, heightens my presence.

It is interesting to notice how when a team leader or facilitator pays attention to themselves and their own needs, their presence seems to diminish. It is as if when their attention and energy is directed outwards toward others, their presence increases and when it is directed inwards towards themselves, their presence diminishes.

Confidence

Confidence can be described as 'a good feeling arising from a deep understanding of one's self, one's own abilities, experience and self-belief', all within a context that is known and presents no, or little, fear and uncertainty.

In situations that are more difficult, unknown and/or threatening, people do take a lead and we often describe them as brave, courageous, and even foolhardy. In such cases, records show that action came before thought, or consideration of whether or not the person taking the action felt confident or not, they just acted. However, it is thought that there was probably some underlying self-belief based on training and previous experience.

If I don't believe in myself how on earth can I expect others to believe in me?

I don't see how it is possible for anyone to lead others without having a strong sense of self-belief and the ability to portray this in their words and actions.

Earlier, I talked about lifespace and how this is an amalgam of everything that has happened in our lives. All the ups and downs, all the knowledge and learning we have done, and all our experiences. It is always with us and we cannot shake it off or change it, we can only add to it by what is happening to us in the present moment.

If, during our lives, we have been encouraged and supported, and if we have had sufficient episodes of success and gained competence in a variety of activities, then it is likely that we will have a resilient sense of self-belief. It is this that we carry with us into new experiences, and that is seen by others as confidence.

I have learned that to say, "I don't know" and "I am wrong" are two of a leader's most powerful utterances.

We are all fallible, but many supposed leaders act as if they are not. Which is really strange when everyone they deal with knows that they are fallible.

I don't think that anyone sets out to make mistakes but we all do, and admitting it when we do, and then owning our mistake, and dealing with the consequences, is the sign of a true leader.

When we are able to admit and to learn from our mistakes, we reduce the fear we might have of making mistakes, and so we become more able to take risks and to step into situations outside our comfort zone.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem can be defined as a strong sense of our worth in the world. It flows from our experiences of success and competence and being able to wear our vulnerability and fallibility with pride.

There have been many moments in my career when my self-esteem has taken knocks from negative feedback, and when this happens it has not always been easy to pick myself up, dust myself down and get on with it.

But then this is how a strong sense of self-esteem grows and develops, not by just getting positive feedback but taking the knocks.

Inspiration

We each of us have our own unique response to the people who inspire us. Sometimes we are inspired by people who do amazing acts of extreme danger; those who perform at the highest levels in sport; or those who give of themselves untiringly to others who are worse off than themselves. For me, perhaps the most inspiring people are ordinary people who do extraordinary things because it is just simply the best thing to do, and who always think of others rather than themselves.

They don't seek glory and when great things work out well, they give the credit to others, and when things go wrong they take responsibility. Here are some of the inspiring behaviours I have met in my journey.

Calmness in the Face of a Crisis

When a crisis occurs, the calm response of the leader lessens the apparent impact of the crisis by enabling others to calmly handle whatever needs to be done. The leader's calmness is infectious and inspires others to remain calm and focused on the situation they face.

Action When it is Needed

When action is needed a leader acts to deal with whatever is

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About the Author

Dr Trevor Bentley, now retired, worked as a leadership consultant and coach, and a group facilitator. He was a member, and Deputy Chair of the IMS, and editor of the Management Services Handbook. He has written over 30 books and numerous published articles on business and leadership.

happening, especially when he or she acts from a place of calm reflection rather than a 'knee jerk' response. At such moments I find it easy to accept and support the leader's action. And I am also inspired to try to act in a similar way in the future.

Patience in the Face of Chaos

'The wise leader knows that it is far more important to be content with what is actually happening than to get upset over what might be happening but isn't' (Heider, 1987, p91).

The patient leader allows time for whatever is happening to unfold so that it becomes clearer what might need to be done in response to events. This does not pre-empt the leader from acting quickly when necessary, but it does inspire others to stop and think before rushing in to deal with what is happening, when events may resolve themselves naturally.

Clarity When There is Confusion

The leader does not need to make things clear, but rather help others to find the clarity they seek from what is happening. It is this guiding of people to clarity that inspires, rather than giving them the answers or explanations they think will make things clear.

Stillness When There is too Much Activity

'Learn to trust what is happening. If there is silence, let it grow; something will emerge. If there is a storm, let it rage; it will resolve into calm' (Heider, 1987, p115).

The art of stillness can be practised in moments throughout the day, at any moment, and fitted into even the shortest time space.

Openness and Receptivity in the Face of Anger and Criticism

The leader who listens carefully to criticism and faces anger with quiet attention, focusing on what the anger is about rather than reacting to it, tends to diffuse the situation. They are then able to learn something about what has given rise to the criticism and anger. I find this quiet, calming approach inspiring.

Becoming the Leader You Are

Discovering my capacity for leadership comes primarily from knowing myself. I need to understand my lifespace and how I have got to where I am.

Recognising leadership moments and my leadership fit is also a factor of my current awareness; both my self-awareness and my awareness of how I navigate around my world.

Becoming the leader you want to be is mostly about knowing yourself, rather than knowing the ins and outs of leadership. If you want to find a situation where you have a full leadership fit, you will need to know the elements of your lifespace, and those situations where you feel confident and competent.

At the end of the day you can only be the leader that you are, so take a look and find your leader within.

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