Leadership and Culture in an Operational Excellence Environment

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Are Great Leaders Born or Made?

A perennial question that has transfixed experts since time immemorial. From my perspective, I have seen great examples of both. I have worked with leaders who have never had a day's training in their lives but have led and inspired people to achieve amazing things. Equally, I have worked alongside individuals who have had the best training and development and have also turned out to be excellent leaders.

The opposite can also be true: top-class university education, first-class training and development but appalling leadership, often egos getting in the way. There is clearly something else at play that creates a great leader.

Let me correct myself, I don't believe that people are born leaders, but I do believe certain individuals are born with the ability to grow their leadership skills with experience rather than formal training. They have a particular set of personality traits and behaviours that stand out.

There are many situations where leaders emerge, sometimes without realising they are taking a leadership position. Consider disasters, earthquakes, floods, and war; leaders emerge and often risk their own lives to lead and help others. I have experienced such situations many times on the shop floor. Shop stewards with limited formal education put university-educated management to the sword with well-thought-through arguments and rationale. I have seen many HR Directors wholly tied up in knots and routinely outfoxed by such individuals. The same shop stewards then take a balanced approach to reach compromises. Equally, anyone can be an effective leader with a willingness to learn and a drive to lead and inspire. Even quiet and introverted individuals can stumble upon something they are passionate about and take the lead.

So, in conclusion, whether one is a naturally born leader or a leader who has emerged through training, the common denominator is simply about having the passion and strength to inspire people to achieve the common goal. It is as simple as that…

Definition of Leadership

The official definition of leadership is *the art of motivating a group of people to act towards achieving a common goal*. I would change this definition slightly to *the art of inspiring a team of people to achieve a common goal*. I have always believed that leaders inspire and people motivate. It is a common mistake to assume that leaders motivate people. Great leaders inspire people. People motivate themselves.

Why Cultural Change is Vital in Operational Excellence

Leadership behaviour is critical in an Operational Excellence environment, but more is needed. A cultural transformation can only succeed if the whole workforce is engaged. Often, even when leaders have the best intentions, the desired culture does not embed across the organisation. Whilst organisations openly express their desire to make daily improvement part of their culture, no more than 10-15% of companies exhibit the type of behaviours seen in the very best Operational Excellence environments. Part of the reason for this is that far more emphasis is placed on the improvement tools and techniques available instead of accepting that Operational Excellence is a cultural change in a business that requires a highly engaged workforce and a precise set of Leadership behaviours and credentials. To succeed and get the maximum benefit from the investment in Operational Excellence, the organisation needs to define what leadership behaviours are needed from both leaders and team members. It then needs to invest in building this leadership capability at every level to achieve the desired culture.

Leadership Behaviours in an Operational Excellence Environment

After over 30 years of working in Operational Excellence, I have compiled the following list of behaviours that highly successful leaders exhibit:

They give and inspire Trust and Loyalty

They have Honesty, Integrity and Resilience

They have Authenticity and the ability to Inspire

They have Empathy

They have Humility

They demonstrate Managerial Courage and Conviction

They are Visionary and Inspiring communicators

They demonstrate Curiosity

They are Egoless

They spend significant time coaching others

Whilst all of the behaviours listed are vital, I will highlight four which require further explanation.

Trust

Of all the Leadership behaviours, Trust is the first of two that are often the most difficult for leaders to demonstrate. Two types of leaders display trust: Trust Givers and Trust Earners. Trust Givers give immediate trust believing that 99.9% of people are totally trustworthy and deal directly with those who abuse their trust rather than punishing the 99.9%. In a Trust Giving environment, an entrepreneurial spirit flourishes; people are encouraged to take sensible risks and learn from their mistakes rather than being criticised or worse, being punished. Trust earners require people to demonstrate that they can be trusted, and this is most often seen in an autocratic/controlling environment. Morale and engagement are typically low. ***Trust then verify*** is a phrase most often used to disguise the Trust Earner's intentions. Research has demonstrated that the most influential leaders are Trust Givers, and the resultant workplace is most often highly engaged, driving much better levels of performance and productivity. Typically, attendance levels are higher, which is always a good indicator of an engaged workforce.

Humility

Probably the most challenging behaviour for leaders to demonstrate, Humility is tough. It requires the strongest individuals to be prepared to admit they are a leader who doesn't know all the answers. It demonstrates publicly that leaders can and do learn from everyone around them. It is often misunderstood as servile or soft leadership. It is nothing of the sort. Leading

with humility requires a leader to demonstrate vulnerability. The ability to do this requires inner confidence, courage and strength of character. Leaders who lead with humility spend time where the value is actually created. Their goal is not to demonstrate how clever they are but to help their team find solutions and demonstrate how clever the team is. As a result, they will often find they have surrounded themselves with loyal, self-motivated teams who strive for the highest results.

Egoless

Ego can be defined as ***'A person's sense of self-esteem or self-worth'***. Our egos play an essential role, provided they are maintained and well-balanced. Egoless leaders understand this balance; they separate their self-esteem from their position as a leader, which means they can move past a desire to be popular, worshipped or always right. Egoless leaders excel in emotional intelligence, displaying remarkable self-awareness and a keen perception of their own strengths and weaknesses. . Rather than lead from the front with an 'I can do it all' mentality, similar to the humility characteristic, they welcome input from others and care about the opinions of their staff. They are not worried about job titles, are more likely to reject the big office in favour of open access and do not seek 'managerial benefits' outside of their agreed remuneration package.

Resilience

A resilient leader is a person who sees failures as temporary setbacks they can recover from quickly. They maintain a positive attitude and a strong sense of opportunity during periods of turbulence and have a calming effect on their teams. When faced with ambiguity, a resilient leader finds ways to move forward and avoids getting stuck. Whilst personal resilience is essential, it is a critical element of effective leadership. The true grit of a leader is not how they perform during the good times but how they display emotional strength, courage and professionalism during the most trying times. Observing resilient people in the most challenging circumstances is an excellent form of coaching and can be a humbling experience.

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