

A New Leadership Paradigm

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Laid back leadership?

After hearing some of the numerous comments made after the 2008 AUSIT Biennial Conference organized by our team in Brisbane last November I really began to wonder if I shouldn't share the ingredients that made our Team Miracle such a potent organising power. Participants wrote that they enjoyed both the fun and exchange of knowledge, that it was the best conference they ever attended, that it was very smoothly managed and encompassed many diverse topics. The only complaint seemed to be that it was impossible to attend ALL the interesting sessions.

Throughout the past few decades, the corporate and public sector has been showering us with many varied definitions of leadership: that one is born to lead, that it can be learned, that a leader needs to be at the front pulling the team, or at the back pushing it up the mountain; that they lead by example, using motivation, or manipulation (also called social skills). Somehow, though, all this academic and para-academic effort does not seem to produce better leaders. "Leaders" have lost sight of what leadership is all about. What we need now is not more theories or fads, not more people espousing rhetoric about leaders with vision, but rather a change in our leadership paradigm.

I recollect how, as a young teacher, my colleagues would congratulate me on being "naturally gifted" simply because my students were always focussed and never skipped class. When at a relatively young age I became Principal of a large college, my school was equally well managed and people told me I was a "naturally gifted administrator". One look at my desk would have belied any such assumptions. But it got me thinking about what it was that I was intuitively/subconsciously doing right.

I was to find the answer many years later, at the Brisbane Conference: it was called "invisible leadership". Because I was completely unaware of doing any leading, and every one just fell in step; comfortably and at their own speed. So instead of a "spearhead" leadership paradigm, we had the "infantry" paradigm - and those who saw the Team Miracle stand proudly to ovation at the Abel Smith Theatre on the last day of the conference will know what I am talking about. A long, straight line that extended from one end of the stage to the other, shoulder to shoulder, heads up with big smiles proudly on their faces. The Infantry on the march to success. There was no leader in sight, because every team member was a leader at some time, in some area, moving this line forward step-by-step.

How did it happen?

I think the best description of Team Miracle I heard came from one of our team members on the closing day of the Conference. She said, "No agendas, just friends!". The Queensland branch is very lucky that way, as the Branch Committee has been together for over 4 years now, encompassing current and past members who are always ready to assist in tight moments.

Friendship aside, I think the second most important aspect of success was that we had a ball organising this event. True, it was hard yakka, but we never thought of it that way. Meetings were relaxed events over coffee and cakes, or overlooking the river, full of exchanged ideas and planning, but also of light-hearted banter and mutual support. We all stayed positive, slightly self-deprecatory and did not take ourselves too seriously. Everyone was putting their best foot forward, while not needing to outshine any one else. It was “all hands on deck” – *unus pro omnibus, omnes pro uno*.

The third aspect is that we communicated vociferously – and still do – a lot. Over 6,000 emails were exchanged between the members of the organising committee in the year preceding the Conference, while another 3,000 were sent by the Chair alone to relevant persons outside the Committee. I am sure other members were sending out as many emails as the Chair. But sending them out does not in itself constitute communication– it was the speed with which members responded to emails, their commitment to reaching an agreement quickly, and their effectiveness at carrying out allotted tasks that made our electronic group such a success.

Fourthly, and no less importantly, we all shared the same goal – from the start this was to be the “Mother of all Conferences”, and Queensland was going to show Australia that it could be done. Of course it bothered us a bit that we had never done anything like this before, but we weren’t going to be daunted by that. We took stock of our assets – what each of us knew best how to do – and built the conference around them. So every body excelled and the Conference was a success.

And finally, Team Miracle was a success because each member had different strengths. A successful leader will surround themselves with people who have different competencies – or rather this kind of leader “attracts” them. These members “took over” the leadership at some stage of the process – during fund raising, negotiations with third parties, etc. EVERYBODY in Team Miracle took responsibility for the whole event, so there was no blaming if one aspect didn’t work or was delayed, as everyone felt responsible and part of it.

What are the characteristics of a “leader who leads invisibly”?

- (a) Be genuinely interested in your team members and other relevant people, not just at a professional level, but at the human, emotional level.
- (b) Show appreciation, extend friendship, be there when things don’t go well. Don’t be afraid to show emotions. Be passionate (but practical and realistic) about what you do.
- (c) Praise in public, criticise constructively and very gently in private.
- (d) Motivate by making people feel they CAN DO and showing trust in their abilities. Share your vision – not just of the goals, but also of how you see them achieving these goals.
- (e) Start on the task you want to have done. Others will come to your help when they see you doing, not when they hear you yakking about doing.
- (f) Be the hardest working team member. If someone beats you to that position, strive to beat them at it. It is amazing how much gets done.
- (g) Don’t stress your team out. Be a Laid Back Leader, as one of our team members said.

- (h) Keep your eyes out for gems that don't shine unless you take a shine to them.
- (i) Stay curious. Life is full of surprises, even in places you think you know very well. Be prepared to be pleasantly surprised.
- (j) Cultivate loyalty. The best catalyst is someone's liking for you. A team works best if it is made of friends, so encourage bonding.
- (k) Don't hector about "objectives" and "goals", but affirm/reassure that the journey will be fun for them. Fun motivates people more than anything else. Avoid going overboard with the "rah rah" factor.
- (l) Visualise what you want at the end of the road, and keep waving the picture - you need to be sure that the rest of the team is also visualising the same thing. If they are not, you need to redraw the picture so that everyone's colours are in it.
- (m) Learn when to let go of dodos. If you have difficulty doing that, place the dodo on a shelf, but stop pretending it is an active team member.
- (n) Make your holes so they fit the pegs - don't try to fit the pegs into your preconceived holes. But be aware that as a team leader you might need to be made of plasticine, and fit into all the holes no one else fits into.

How does this apply to AUSIT?

It is true that when a community extends beyond a certain number, face-to-face contact becomes difficult. However difficult and impossible are two different things. You can't get to know everybody in one month, but if you are leading a large team - such as an AUSIT branch - make time and effort to get to know a few each week. After all, how can one lead an unknown quantity and expect the quantity to produce quality?

Ideally, a branch chair should do three things: encourage, assist and develop. Encourage the growth of membership, assist the membership in their professional development and networking efforts, and develop an environment which promotes their industry interests. None of these can be achieved if the branch chair does not know their members on a personal level, or when the members don't know who is leading them.

The same set of qualities also applies to national leadership. It is true that they will need to be modified - you can't meet half of your membership at a café on a Saturday morning - but the basics are very much the same. It is not enough to be read once in a while; the national leader needs to be "seen" attending various functions in various states, so that the state membership does not feel that they are being ignored. This is especially so with the more remote of our memberships - Tasmania, Northern Territory and Western Australia. Ideally, these should be opportunities for networking with the goal of strengthening ties and loyalties. And it can't be done once a year at a major event only attended by a small percentage.

Ongoing communication, knowledge sharing and reaching out to members is a matter of the highest importance, so that the enthusiasm of the leadership is not only felt, but spread across the membership. Thus an organisation like AUSIT can be sure to retain its members, as well as attract new ones. After all, we need to constantly market ourselves to our existing members to retain their loyalty and interest. . Eventually word of mouth will spread and new members will be motivated to join in.

While of course it is a complex task to lead, it basically comes down to a leader who – because of their genuine interest in people - has the ability to inspire and be inspired.