

What do I know now that I wish that I'd known then? Learning that has helped me to become a better leader

"Only very rarely has a person to the same extent as Obama captured the world's attention and given its people hope for a better future. His diplomacy is founded in the concept that those who are to lead the world must do so on the basis of values and attitudes that are shared by the majority of the world's population".

So reads the citation of the Nobel Committee for Barack Obama to be awarded the prize for peace. All of us – even his staunchest supporters – were probably somewhat surprised by this news. What had he really achieved as a world leader to deserve it? How could he accept it at the same time as he was contemplating an escalation of the war effort in Afghanistan – and struggling with ratings on his personal leadership back home? Even if we set aside the extreme views of some right wing TV presenters and Republican politicians in the US, did we not really feel they had come up with their award just two or three years too early?

The Obama phenomenon is not just about the sense of relief that someone with the right values could follow the disappointing era of George W. Bush, nor that he was the first black President of the US. It was about how he had got there, his uplifting journey to the most powerful leadership role in the world via the tough world of front line community work in the most challenging communities of Chicago, and from very complicated family roots and relationships across many continents.

So it is perhaps this sense of leadership as a journey as opposed to a series of episodic achievements (or failures) that I might have understood earlier to good effect, where assessment of performance is as much to do with direction of travel and espousing of the right values and behaviors as it is with delivered targets. Early expectations can of course prove to be short lived or seriously contested. We only need to reflect on the early Tony Blair period with its enormous transformational expectations to know that perceptions can change. And the same may happen with Obama – although hopefully not. But maybe the Nobel Committee saw enough genuine promise here to take Obama on trust. Two very important phrases underpin their decision. Firstly they discerned a quality within him that suggests an alignment with values and attitudes that are shared very widely. It has enabled him to make with absolute conviction some very courageous speeches to the Muslim world in Cairo and on nuclear disarmament in Germany and Russia. Secondly they focused on his capacity to give people hope which a lot of leaders forget to do as they jostle to compete on the altar of short term targets and delivery.

Like most of my generation with a range of management experience from the mid-1980's onwards, my leadership career has been against a backcloth of performance assessment by measurable outcomes – from Management by Objectives to Public Service Agreements, from Payment By Results to Key Performance Indicators. Of course deliverables and outcomes matter, but they focus on the *end* of each phase of the career leadership journey, rather than assessment of qualities during the journey itself. What followers look for in their leaders is that inner beacon of values, energy, hope, challenge and support – rather than a simple recitation of beautifully formed deliverables. A leader overwhelmed by the prospect of undeliverable targets loses the energy and vitality to provide those other forms of support and motivation to team members and colleagues.

This chimes strongly with the attribute of authenticity, so eloquently described by Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones in their book 'Why should any one be led by you?' As they say: "Authentic leaders display a consistency between words and deeds,....the capacity to display coherence in role

performance....authentic leaders display a consistent underlying thread. They display a “real self” that holds these separate performances together”.¹

To help us to be better leaders we may need many more examples of the Obama mould at more normal levels and ordinary domains of leadership, otherwise the ‘leadership by measurables’ contingent wins the day every time. We know this emphasis on being the compelling role model throughout the leadership journey is instinctively right: we just do not have the courage to stick with it in the face of current paradigms of delivery-focused leadership thinking in the public sector. We also do not want to face up to the paradox that leadership is a complex and multi-faceted thing that thrives on being nurtured, that needs time and does not thrive from being ‘done to’.

This concept of the journey takes me into the leadership of change and in a seriously unpredictable environment. Any one who sails quite a lot (as I do) will know that when sailing a particular course in complex weather and tidal conditions, the boat will be travelling in a markedly different direction to that of its destination at various times during the journey, as it tacks and gybes and responds to a welter of changes in tide, wind directions, weather, and other vessels. The job of the skipper is not only to make sure the final destination is reached, but to interpret for the rest of the crew why the journey has taken this mixture of odd manoeuvres and to give them confidence. We cannot always predict the route, and sometimes conditions dictate a slightly different end point. That process of offering interpretation and reassurance is as important as reaching the destination. The interpretative model of leadership is something I have come to appreciate much later in my career.

From all this, the concept about change that I wish I had known and understood sooner in my career was ‘emergent change’. It challenges the change management methodology (still prevalent in many target based approaches), that change management simplistically involves steering a project or programme from point ‘a’ to point ‘b’. The truth however is that in today’s change management journey, we will only know a limited amount of the terrain we are crossing, and most of the challenges – or indeed necessarily changed goals – will emerge as we go. I once invited the senior commander of the British invasion force in Iraq to address a management conference in higher education. He said that when they landed off the Shatt al-Arab waterway en route for Basra, they only knew 25% of what they really needed to know. The leadership skill was to apply their well trained leadership sensors to fill in the remaining 75% that was unknown, and to offer that skill of interpretation to the rest of the force that provided that vital confidence to proceed with the invasion. They reached Basra with the minimum of loss. Leaders in less dramatic and more conventional situations may feel they know a lot about their context, staff, threats and opportunities, but the reality is they do not. The real change skill is about coping with uncertainty, ambiguity and ambivalence, and for many this is not something that comes naturally.

So, the leadership model I have come to understand better over time is that developing leadership capacity is about equipping staff and organizations to be “change ready”, to be resilient in the face of a lot of ambiguity and uncertainty. I cannot promise them a clear route map for a particular change initiative, but I can interpret for them, coach, mentor and advise. Whilst competences are important, the other ‘c word’ – confidence - may be of equal validity as a leadership trait and something that leaders must critically impart to and develop within their team.

If these constructs help me to wrestle with the leadership journey and the management of change, they do not offer enough to help with the conundrum of how to offer leadership which creates a

continuing sense of agility, creativity and innovation in organisations. The challenges are well summed up by Gary Hamel in his book 'The Future of Management'². Although more private sector focused, the questions are just as valid for the public sector:

1. How can you broaden the scope of employee freedom by managing less, without sacrificing focus, discipline and order?
2. How can you create a company [or organisation] where the spirit of community, rather than the machinery of bureaucracy, binds people together?
3. How can you enlarge the sense of mission that people feel throughout the organisation in a way that justifies extraordinary contribution?

The first of these is the eternal leadership dilemma facing the public sector (particularly for politicians), because it involves the paradox of letting go without forfeiting the guarantee of delivery. We have to continue to strive to move from a parent-child to an adult-adult relationship in the oversight of public service delivery. We perhaps can draw upon one key concept that has helped us become better and more reflective leaders in recent times, namely the capacity to understand ourselves and our impact on others. In the last 10 years we have witnessed a revolution in self awareness and reflective processes, riding on techniques such as 360 degree feedback, and underpinned by Daniel Goleman's work on Emotional Intelligence (EQ)³. Somehow we have got to take that leadership learning more deeply into our organisations, to create a more resilient culture of self awareness and mature reflection. We need to underpin it by more extensive use of coaching, mentoring and action learning at lower levels of the organisation. In the way that certain parts of manufacturing adopted 'Kaizen', we have got to find the equivalent for public service delivery organisations as a vehicle for trust building with external stakeholders and politicians.

Hamel's 'spirit of community' in his second challenge ought to be easy within public service delivery, but somehow we tend to lose the plot amidst centrally driven targets and initiatives. As I went through my career, I increasingly worked in organisations with a strong sense of place, and came to realise how using that binding power of community could help one to become a better leader. These places included Granada in the north-west of England (at the height of its 'Granadaland' phase), the South Bank Arts Centre and Hampshire County Council – all organisations with a strong culture of place that helped bind staff together with a clear sense of mission, values and commitment.

Staff need a sense of place or community to underpin their commitment to service delivery. One of the most unfortunate mistakes of recent Labour and Tory governments was in different ways to communicate their lack of faith in local government and devolved delivery. This simply undermined the trust in the relationship between front line delivery and central government. Fortunately now, all three main parties have placed a stronger emphasis on place shaping, and some very interesting pilot 'total place' initiatives are being undertaken with the strong encouragement of Sir Michael Bichard and the Institute for Government, and the firm endorsement of government.

Sometimes, there is not the obvious sense of a *geographical* community, but a good leader can discern where that sense of common territory can be found – through shared values or professional ideals – and use them to create the binding effect in Hamel's challenge. An additional concept which I have learnt a lot from in recent years is that of services that are 'co-created'. It is particularly relevant to the world of education which I inhabit, and supports a sense of integration between the domains of service provider and service user, and can underpin the sense of shared place.

Hamel's third question takes us to the heart of motivation and leadership. My leadership training was rooted in Herzberg and Maslow, and I have to say I always found their theories were a blinding statement of the obvious. What they lacked was any sense of dynamic or reciprocity in the relationship between staff and their leaders. It was when I came to work closely with the concept of the 'psychological contract' that I started to understand the basis of motivational leadership.

The concept was originally conceived by Argyris in the 1960's, but has taken a long time to embed here. It revolves around the concept of mutual expectations in the employment relationship, and focuses on the ingredients in that relationship that underpin the sense of fair treatment and an acceptable deal. I worked on it with the CIPD in the 1990's and our research on it across all sectors threw up disturbing messages for public service leadership. It showed that the psychological contract could be perceived as more positive in the private sector undergoing serious restructuring and redundancies than in the relatively cushioned security of the civil service or local government. Staff preferred the clear, straightforward deal in the private sector, although the climate was tougher. The expectations were too complicated in the much of the public sector, generating resentment and dissatisfaction, notwithstanding the relatively favourable conditions of employment they enjoyed.

To rise to Gary Hamel's challenge of 'enlarging the sense of mission' such that it delivers his 'extraordinary contribution', we as leaders have got to learn how to work more systematically with the culture of our organisations and find that area of positive mutual expectations. In my organisation, we take groups of senior higher education leaders on missions into organisations in other sectors, and allow them to become OD consultants for intense periods to help them understand how a positive organisational climate can be created.

So, in conclusion, the lessons and recommendations which I draw from this quick scan of my personal leadership learning are:

- Judging leaders more on the values and models they offer their followers, and their confidence building characteristics to inspire delivery through them:
- A model of change which is emergent, where the prime goal is to foster sustained 'change readiness':
- An approach to employee engagement which understands the psychological contract, and builds on the idea of co-creation with users with a strong sense of place.

Perhaps I should end this journey into what I have progressively learned about leadership in the format of the Desert Island Discs programme. Sadly my boat I have been sailing with my emergent style of leadership has – against all odds - run aground on a remote island and I am the only survivor. I have radio contact, however, and am interviewed by Kirsty Young on the programme as my battery runs out. At the end, she offers me three things - one leadership theory for the 21st century, one leadership book (apart from the Bible and Shakespeare – both quite provocative on leadership!), and one final quote on leadership.

On the theory, I would opt for the model of 'leader as interpreter'. We are getting much clearer about the relevance of this style to contemporary issues – as followers, we need believable leaders who interpret a very complex world for us, who engage well internally and externally, and who coach as much as command, and support as much as challenge.

For the book, the author I would choose would be Charles Handy, (one of the few UK authors on leadership with genuine global reputation) and probably his book 'The Age of Unreason'⁴. It specifically

covers his concept of 'tight loose' leadership, which is very relevant to this topsy turvy world where we want the tightest bottom line combined with maximum innovation and experimentation. And he always told a compelling story (often very funnily), which is a critical characteristic of good 21st century leaders.

And the quote? Probably I would choose the final paragraph of Nelson Mandela's "The Long Walk to Freedom"⁵, because it conveys that sense of a journey - a long haul - and leadership through inner personal values. As in Jim Collins' Level 5 leader in "Good to Great", we see that blend of personal humility, extraordinary professional will and subjugating ego to the greater good. I suppose I hope that this is the kind of thing people will eventually say about Barack Obama and that in time, the Nobel Peace Prize committee will have been proved right in their judgment.

Let's finish with that quote:

"I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter. I have made missteps on the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended."

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¹ 'Why should anyone be led by you?' Rob Goffee & Gareth Jones. Harvard Business School Press 2006

² 'The Future of Management'. Gary Hamel. Harvard Business School Press 2007.

³ 'The Emotionally Intelligent Workplace'. Daniel Goleman. Jossey-Bass. 2001

⁴ 'The Age of Unreason'. Charles Handy. Hutchinson Business Books. 1989

⁵ 'Long Walk to Freedom'. Nelson Mandela. Little, Brown & Company. 1994