

Postmodern leadership – a few ideas

Small actions, big outcomes

The postmodern leader, by contrast, is more like a butterfly. One of the least understood but most significant metaphors in relation to complex systems is the statement that “a butterfly flaps its wings in China and causes a tornado in America”. Notwithstanding the meteorological improbability of such a phenomenon, it expresses clearly the idea that, in a complex system, a small event that occurs in a specific time and place can have a profound impact in a much wider sphere. An example of this would be an avalanche. The potential for such an avalanche builds up slowly, as snows falls and drifts. At some point, a relatively small action triggers an avalanche (a loud noise, or perhaps just that final snowflake that – changing the metaphor – is ‘the straw that breaks the camel’s back’), and huge changes follow.

This idea was illustrated in the film “Jurassic Park”, when the ‘chaotician’ Dr Ian Malcolm (played by actor Jeff Goldblum) was explaining the likelihood of unexpected outcomes from the DNA engineering undertaken by the scientists at Jurassic Park, to one of the palaeontologists, Dr Ellie Sattler (played by actress Laura Dern). He placed a small drop of water on the back of her hand, and noted the way it rolled. He then placed another drop in the same place, and showed how it rolled another way because of minute changes in skin tension, the breeze, and so on. The basic idea is that not only can small actions have large and often unforeseen consequences, but also that lessons and experience from the past or drawn from elsewhere are not always that helpful, because current circumstances are different and so the outcomes of our actions in a complex system are likely to be very different this time around.

In such a context being a butterfly is a risky business. Who knows what kind of small actions will lead to enormous messes that someone has to clear up? OK, that’s a fairly pessimistic view of the possibilities for change offered to a butterfly by a chaotic system. But it does mean that leadership in a diverse, chaotic/complex context is probably going to be like that proposed by Charles Handy and William Bergquist:

“Great visions from great people ... are in short supply at the ‘end of history’. It is up to us to light our own small fires in the darkness”

”Change comes from small initiatives which work, initiatives which, when imitated, become the fashion”

“Postmodern conditions usually require small steps towards renewal rather than elaborate plans”

The leader as a butterfly

The role of leaders merits special attention. Diverse, unbounded organizations need a distinct style of leadership. The leaders of the modern era worked within ordered, bounded organizations. As such they often had to be good managers, able to develop structures and processes that would allow their organization to fulfil its goals. They provided guidance and training, continuity and planning. They were like silkworms – predictable, industrious and productive.

Like a butterfly, postmodern leadership has a limited time in which to live (or make an impact). It must constantly change directions with the wind, and it is not protected like

the chrysalis. Like the organizations they lead, postmodern leaders have to be very clear about their mission and purpose, all the while fluttering in a turbulent environment and accepting that some outcomes may be the exact opposite of what was foreseen or intended. Moments of glory are often brief and unseen. I find it hard to conceive of a clearer parallel to the concept of servant leadership so often enjoined on Christians.

This servant role can be extended further. In an organization with blurred boundaries, leaders have to spend a lot of time on integration and collaboration, ensuring that the vision is commonly owned, understood and acted upon. They act as the 'glue' for the organization, through the creation of a sense of community and belonging, and as the servant of those with whom they work. Old-style command-and-control approaches have to be replaced by ones based on partnership and cooperation, where mediation and negotiation skills are at a premium.

Helping people to embrace autonomy and risk

One of the assumptions in contemporary leadership and management literature is that most people wish to be in charge of their own working futures, and that it is the restraints of bureaucracy and standardisation that hold people back. Give people flexibility and room to manoeuvre, so the argument goes, and they will become more committed, more innovative, and more fruitful.

But what if this isn't always the case? What if, because of their long-term experience of standardised systems, or because of previous negative experiences of change, or even just because of personal temperament, people don't want to be 'set free'? What if, most of the time, most people are quite happy to be told what to do? How then can leaders and managers motivate people to embrace the risk that comes with personal freedom, based on the belief that if they do so, despite their immediate instincts, they will indeed find a more fulfilling and productive working experience?

Viv Thomas explores the role of leaders in similar terms in his book "Future Leader". A few quotations serve to illustrate his approach:

"How do you help people to relish change when security and safety appear to be the dominant issues in their lives? Space has to be provided for promoting creativity, learning and innovation. That will mean allowing room for people to fail. Individuals will need time to reflect and be refreshed. Management models that merely control will be inappropriate if creativity is going to be stimulated.

"People need new knowledge and the reshaping of their ideas if they are going to continue to grow. This requires regular innovation, which in turn needs a measure of instability. Leaders have to prepare people for all the conditions they face and not just the ones they would prefer.

"Attempts to seek some sort of secure equilibrium where we feel that all has to be nicely balanced are going to fail. In one sense, the really great leaders drive away from stability and into chaos. If an organisation is going to adapt and grow it has to become unstable".