

Leaders get the teams they deserve

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Consider the exasperation of a CEO when their top team is underperforming. “Why is this happening?” they ask. Dig down and the answer is that leaders get the teams they deserve. The team’s dynamics are a reflection of the leader. In the C-suite this can mean that the top team is dominated by the CEO. They spend their time second guessing what the CEO wants to happen. Leaders can have long shadows.

You get what you project

Leaders often try to fix their team rather than themselves. But the inner state and routines of the leader are key to the performance of employees. The leader’s ability to see and address their own patterns, expectations and behaviour enables employees to perform. Change starts with self.

I worked with one senior leader whose organisation was stuck in lower-quartile performance. She had a reputation for being a perfectionist and not easily accepting any feedback. Team members routinely described her leadership style as “scary”. Preparing for a team meeting, I invited her to open up to people’s concerns and needs. While personally uncomfortable, she agreed to do something very risky at the start of the meeting.

She opened with an invitation for frank and open feedback. The surprise among the team was palpable. Gingerly, they all stepped up to the plate, and her invite led to a cathartic conversation in which the whole employees processed their fear and anxiety about not being good enough, and how this was disabling them from taking full leadership responsibility in the team and the wider organisation. Far from weakening the team, this full frank acknowledgement strengthened it. But the leader had to make the first move and acknowledge her own role in the story.

Team leaders also need to tune into the wider system

Appreciating that a team is not an island but part of a wider reality is essential. This is what I call systemic perceiving, tuning into what is being experienced right here as some kind of signal as to what is being experienced more widely. Every team and every leader performs in the context of a system — and reflects it.

The HR director of a multinational company thought that his team was out to get him, and that employees were needy and childlike. They seemed intent on fighting him rather than working with him. When I talked to him, the nature of the shadow over his team became clear.

His two predecessors had both left in uncomfortable and abrupt circumstances. The team remembered this and felt that he, too, was unlikely to stay for long. As a result, they were unwilling to bond with the new leader. They weren't out to get him, but the leader's role had simply become toxic. As the director hadn't spared the time to see and understand his new context, he had not fully appreciated the troubled legacy he had inherited.

Leading teams well enables you to lead system change well

Cultivating an inner ear alive to the self, team and organisational context enables you to do three things:

- Discern that what is here is also there

Just as a Geiger counter detects radioactivity, what you are experiencing in your team is a systemic detector. This is not the normal way to view experience – we tend to make sense of what happens at face value. Systemic perceiving halts habitual and conventional interpretations and gets you into a deeper and more accurate contact with reality. There is so much systemic data in front of us that, if we are not present and attuned, can easily pass us by.

This is particularly applicable to top teams leading change. They alone hold a fragment of each part of the wider system. When management teams can improve what might feel like a tiny element of how they interact, it has an amplifying effect on the wider culture. Before they roll out (expensive) values programs to change their organisation's culture, how about shifting the way they as a team operate first?

- Approach difficulty and disturbance as a resource

Disturbance is nothing but a systemic clue into the organisation's story. Just as emotional triggers can set off your own personal story, so whole systems have their sources of entanglement and difficulty. It is more natural to respond to difficulty by finding a place of comfort. Yet, until you have uncovered troubling dynamics, acknowledged them and cleaned them up a bit, a system will be unable to move forward. Change flows when difficulty is seen.

I worked with an organisation with a business unit facing terminal decline. At the same time, they had set up an innovation team to find new revenue streams for a different future. The leaders felt unable to face the fact that the part of their organisation that had contributed wealth and benefit to society in the past, was fast approaching its sell-by date.

Until the source of the difficulty was seen, the whole system remained stuck and the innovation team seemed unable to find its place. There was a strong feeling of betrayal among the staff. When true acknowledgement of this business unit's past contribution was expressed, the whole of the organisation relaxed and the leadership energy flowed, even though that meant closing down parts of their business. Teams and organisations gain strength when difficult truths are acknowledged.

Create strong and flourishing whole systems

An essential task of a top team is to create a flourishing organisation that can deliver its desired outcomes. Successful team leaders invest attention not just on setting vision and strategy, managing tasks and numbers, or attending to key external stakeholders, but also on cultivating the health and vitality of the complex social system they lead.

All human systems – and this clearly includes teams – are more resilient, and can therefore handle change, when four basic universal laws are attended to.

Belonging. We all have a basic need to belong to a system: a place where we matter and feel secure – be that one's

team, company, profession, family or nation. Everybody has the same right to a place, that all voices are heard and recognised, and that nothing or no one is excluded.

Time. You can only look forward with confidence when you know the truth about your past. If spectres such as an organisation's founder who has not been suitably honoured, or past upsets such as unfair treatment of people or aggressive takeovers remain unprocessed, then there will be unease and drag in the present moment.

Exchange. When there is a good balance of giving and receiving in a team, no unhealthy ties that bind, then people are free to give of their best. It sounds simple, but clear and heartfelt acknowledgement, saying 'thank you' to your team, who are putting in an inordinate amount of effort in a big change, can work wonders.

Place. When structures and hierarchies are made visible, every person and team has a sense of purpose, their competence is assured and they can function well. The role, or function, and its relationship to the organisation's purpose are more important than the individual.

Teams have natural hierarchies, such as age and length of service or affiliation. It's sometimes surprising how, by making these natural hierarchies visible (just get your team standing in line according to length of service, or how long they have each known you), the group is immediately settled and strengthened and able to get on with their task.

When these four ordering forces of belonging, time, exchange and place are well attended to, teams have the best chance to flourish and people give of their best. This then creates movement in the wider system they lead. Leaders get the teams they deserve, but what they deserve can be transformed.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the authors' book [Still Moving: How to Lead Mindful Change](#), Wiley Blackwell, 2017.
- The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics and Political Science.
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Deborah Rowland has led change in major global corporations including BBC Worldwide, Gucci Group, PepsiCo and Shell where she has had Vice-President of Organisational Development and Group HR Director roles. She is the author of *Still Moving: How to Lead Mindful Change* (Wiley 2017) and co-author of *Sustaining Change: Leadership That Works* (Wiley, 2008). In addition to speaking, writing and teaching on the subject Deborah now consults to institutional leaders around the world on how to implement change in more effortless ways. She tends to her own inner game via regular yoga, meditation, art gazing, painting and walks in nature, in particular along the spectacular coastal paths of Southern Cornwall.



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