Strategic commentary

Humble leadership: hippy fantasy or 21st century necessity?

Steve Hearsum

W e live in a time that offers us a chance to (once again) inquire into the kinds of leaders we are drawn to personally, socially, politically, professionally and organisationally. Do we value the sage and the thoughtful or the instinctive and emotional? Do we want leaders who offer us certainty (or at least appear to be saying they have "it" and can deliver "it"), or ones who demonstrate an ability to wrestle with 'not knowing' and work their way through complex conditions and relationships?

Let me declare my position at the outset. The former is an illusion and absurdity at best, and flies in the face of reality. The latter allows us to move forward based on "what is" and reach a shared understanding and, if we are lucky, engage in constructive conflict to the point where we (all) get to move forward.

Now to step back, and cast a glance across the Atlantic, where Donald Trump blazes a trail of extroverted and narcissistic leadership that is the antithesis of what we might term humble leadership. Other flavours are available, such as caring, compassionate or humble leadership. I want to focus on the latter. Park for a moment, again, the politics element and ask yourself how you respond to Trump as a leader? Would you want to work for

him? Would you choose to? Certainly he is financially successful, and if that is your primary and only criteria for success, then probably not worth reading on.

Flip to the UK and the certainty of Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage and Michael Gove on one side of the Brexit debate, and David Cameron *et al.* opposing them. Whilst both camps had no monopoly on rhetoric, the absolutism of those campaigning to leave and the confidence of their assertions made the rapid rowing back post the vote all the more intriguing. Maybe with increasing hindsight the same is true of the Remain campaign.

What is humble leadership?

Part of the challenge is that we can throw terms like "humility" around and assume we have a shared understanding, and that is not necessarily the case. Owens and Hekman (2012) define leader humility here, and the implications of this definition are where we go next:

> Leader humility at the most basic, fundamental level appears to involve leaders catalysing and reinforcing mutual leader-follower development by eagerly and publicly (i.e. outwardly, explicitly, transparently) engaging in the messy process of learning and growing. Even more simply put, humble leaders model how to grow to their followers. Rather than just talking about the

Steve Hearsum is Senior Consultant at Roffey Park Institute, Horsham, UK.

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importance of continual learning or supporting programs for followers' development and growth, humble leaders transparently exemplify how to develop, by being honest about areas for improvement (i.e. acknowledging mistakes and limitations), encouraging social learning by making salient the strengths of those around them (spotlighting follower strengths) and being anxious about listening, observing and learning by doing (modelling teachability).

Herein lies the rub: humble leadership is socially constructed, as are all other modes and the more we strain to "thingy-fy" it, the greater the risk of skimming over the challenges in identifying what needs to be different to achieve or develop it, and, crucially, to answer the "so what?" question – that is: what are the business and organisational benefits of greater humility? And by extension, is not all this a bit self-indulgent in a time of austerity and increasingly pressurised workplaces?

Wrong!

One of the (many) aspects of leadership behaviour that has long intrigued me is the capacity (or lack of it) to acknowledge mistakes, the humility, if you will, to fully inhabit a space of your own "wrongness". In the context of Trump, Farage, Johnson *et al.*, this question of how comfortable leaders are in acknowledging when they are not just mistaken, but plain wrong, sharpens.

The fully embodied, plain spoken, unashamed and unqualified wrong is a rare animal, and part of the reason is that it requires us to have our beliefs about ourselves fundamentally challenged. Kathryn Shultz, in her book *Being Wrong* (2010, p. 8) comments: "Likewise it is surprisingly difficult to get angry unless you are either convinced that you are correct, or humiliated and defensive about being wrong". When I read that line again, Donald Trump loomed large in my mind as the archetype of that behaviour.

The challenge is how to get comfortable with "wrong-ness", not in the sense of abdicating responsibility, rather in service of relationship, learning and development, and in organisational and business terms, 'of doing things better', more often.

Maybe what I am alluding to here is integrity, as another facet of humble leadership. Again, I have heard clients question how sustainable acting out of integrity can be when you need to run a business, and particularly when times are hard. Equally, compassion, care and other humane values are deemed disposable or nice-to-haves rather than core.

The work of Integrity Action, amongst others, challenges that assumption. Alan Barlow, one of their trustees, has written one of the few case studies that link integrity as a leadership behaviour to performance, in a commercial context, detailing the

transformation "of a mid-size international engineering group from a declining, under-invested business with a dysfunctional culture to a world leader".

Inner trump or inner hippy?

I believe we get the political leaders that systemically reflect our collective selves, and the same is true in organisations. Yes, you may not appoint your MD or CEO and they may be able to fire you on a whim, and I have seen and worked with organisations where the collective behaviours of staff are the decisive factor in the longevity of a leader rather than anything they do or do not do. Arguably, that is a given in all organisations, as leaders only remain in post so long as the culture tolerates or supports them (crucially that is not the same as liking or agreeing with your leader).

As individual leaders and human beings, I suspect we have our Inner Trump and Inner Hippy. The extremes of both are dangerous and not easy to be around. And not all the behaviours are bad, it is a question of degree, context, intent and impact.

Working with difference

Which of the above you cultivate, or moderate, will influence, amongst other things, your tolerance of and ability to work with difference.

Are you more inclined to ever-increasing bouts of rhetoric and dismissiveness, a need to stamp out and exclude views that do not chime with your map of the world? Say hello to your Inner Trump, and start building walls. At the other extreme, are you more inclined to tear down walls and find common cause and harmony, even at the expense of doing the

work you are there to do, so long as peace reigns? Hello Inner Hippy.

I could now offer you a list of things to do or not do, in service of your leadership. I am not sure how useful that is, as there are more lists of leadership advice available than you could ever hope to read.

What I will do, though, is offer you some questions to chew on:

Q1. What does humility mean to me?

Q2. How will I know if I am sufficiently humble, based on what criteria?

Q3. How does my humility compare to others?

Q4. What impact is all this having on my work and relationships with others, both co-workers and clients?

Corresponding author

Steve Hearsum can be contacted at: steve.hearsum@roffeypark.com