



LEADERSHIP PATHOLOGIES

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Here's an interesting question someone asked me recently. 'If you have two CVs in front of you and one is very experienced while the other is very skilled, which one would you choose?' Too many people choose experience by default, taking comfort in the fact that the person has done similar work before and will 'fit in' seamlessly. Often, it is exactly the opposite that is needed for growth – someone to come in with immense talent and a skill set to shake things up and set the path for innovation and change.

Recently, I read 'The Leader Who Had No Title' by Robin Sharma and it set me thinking about how many people miss this obvious truth about their jobs. Demonstrating moments of leadership or practicing it in one's

daily life requires no title. All it entails is a love of the job, an inner drive, strategic vision and positive communication with colleagues. Many people have the ingredients for leadership but wait too long to show it. Most people seem to have the idea that leadership requires playing on the front foot only after given the authority or the badge to do so.

However, the reality is exactly the reverse of it. Leadership titles come to those who expand their roles and responsibilities to take on initiatives for growth and innovation, those who can be bold enough to challenge the status quo and to support the vision of their organisation consistently with conviction and commitment. The power index in corporate culture and even academia

prevents many from taking steps towards leadership. Many people give up before they try. Some wait for approvals and accolades that they will never receive. Some lack the confidence to own their vision and try out new things against resistance. Still more have learnt to work silently under the directives of their bosses without adding value to their work or leveraging their unique abilities.

A close look at our education system will reveal exactly why this is the case. In our traditional set-up, interrogation and dissent are discouraged. Questioning authority is considered the equivalent of disobedience or rebellion. Those in authority have come to use fear-based tactics to win compliance, resulting in barriers that prevent students from free self-expression – who can, at best, share what is palatable to their teachers. These demons of thought control then follow us into the corridors of professional life. Our young people who haven't learnt to transition from being meek towards authority can't find the voices to challenge their bosses.

Too many become jaded right at the outset in their first job when they are brimming with ideas and enthusiasm but can't find the voice or confidence to show those in authority a better way of doing things. Historically, in our society, we have hired people and taught them how to do their jobs by exposing them to more experienced hands. This brave new post-COVID world is no longer a place for that mechanism. Young people now have far more knowledge, expertise and technical ability as well as access to a world of ideas through digital means. They need to be given the reins to show their employer how the job can be done in a smarter, quicker and more cost-effective way.

Unfortunately, our culture doesn't support such innovation. We have come to regard young people as naïve and not to be taken seriously until they have decades of experience under their wing coupled with some silver hair. Age is automatically worthy of reverence as is experience. It's about time we start considering what good experience can be in a world that is changing so fast, the old ways of doing things are not only outdated but also damaging. Rejecting cost-effective ways of doing things, for example, while we continue to churn the old wheel may mean loss and regression. Hiring three people to do the job of one person can have the same damaging effect. Failing to enable new talent to spread their wings can have the same effect.

Sadly, we have indoctrinated our young ones into believing that they must wait to be invited to show their talents, that they must maintain distance from authority, refrain from challenging those in power and remain subservient to experience. Another damaging perception is that somehow people can't transcend into leadership roles until they have 'paid their dues' and been through the rungs of the ladder that involve a whole lot of basic tasks and menial work. In today's world, we have quick digital apps for that. It takes young people less than an

hour to produce analysis that would entail long days of data-crunching in the past.

Ideally, we should be focusing on reading critically, questioning ruthlessly and communicating ideas in a way that sells. Much of the future will rely on selling communicable ideas, negotiating and reaching sound conclusions collaboratively. For that to happen, the more experiences ones may have to learn from the skilled, inexperienced ones and the leadership will need to join hands without barriers to fill this gap. If we could walk down a road where experience and skill go hand-in-hand and age barriers could collapse in equal measure, we would produce more leaders through sheer empowerment.

In most growth-oriented societies, vision is rarely achieved by fixing one part of the whole. Empowerment comes from giving access to ideas and innovation in all aspects of society and usually starts in the home and in classrooms. Where children are taught to think independently and act ethically, and are valued for their self-expression, they learn to become leaders with or without the titles of authority. They learn to give their best when they are taught to prioritise, respond to the job at hand and execute with the support of their teams. We lay little emphasis on getting along with people – our school systems don't teach conflict resolution, or even negotiation skills. Yet, these life skills can be learnt even in the early years and they pay remarkable dividends as young people navigate their intensely demanding work

lives. Too many people find themselves quitting jobs when they are forced to work with those they don't get along with. Rather than working strategically to get others on their side, they choose to confront and fall into a deadlock. A critical ingredient of leadership involves attuning ourselves to others, finding ways of making a pact where communication works both ways, where people are seen and heard and where collaborative efforts become the norm rather than a power struggle.

Here is where the role of Humanities in higher education is paramount. Societies that have traditionally valued and supported the growth of humanities and have focused on these subjects at all levels of schooling have produced a work force that is holistically developed to meet the challenges of their work life. A Finance graduate, for example, would need to learn communication skills to become a leader, critical thinking skills to analyse data, and creative imagination to be able to use the financial information to improve strategic outcomes in future.

We've often heard the adage that true leaders inspire and empower others, but we don't always teach leaders how to mentor their successors. Being told what to do and being shown how to do it is a thing of the past. Unlocking potential and enabling people to work out unique solutions and having the courage to experiment without fear of reproach would set forth more leaders than followers.

It's time our society embarked on 'the road not taken' as Robert Frost famously called it. Leadership is a journey to embark on, with a range of promising skills, not a destination to wait for. And on this journey, everyone is a leader no matter what their role.

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