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There they go... I must hasten after them, for I am their leader

How many deep thinking leaders do we have in New Zealand who can articulate the connections between where we want to be and how we are to deploy the knowledge, skills and processes required to get there? Creating a future or just letting it happen is a conscious choice; a choice to live in our own future or one decided by someone else.

These are fundamental change challenges that need leaders with 'bottle', vision and a high tolerance for ambiguity. Who is stepping forward for this possible future and what are we doing to create robust sustainable channels for leadership development?

Our future depends on managing a balance of fragile systems; our precious natural environment, our social and political systems and our economy. A breakdown in any one of these systems will dramatically impact on the others. Converting these opportunities into reality will not be about cost minimisation and cringing risk management, it will be about leaders engaging and managing the delivery of our capability.

Looking up and out, globalisation has seen the evolution of multi and supranational organisations. Technology and media means that there is increasing transparency on what organisations and their leaders are doing. Even in the constrained environment of the current recession, economic influences and information technology continues to blur the boundaries of national sovereignty and multinational board rooms. Of the 100 largest economies in the world 50 of them are Corporations. Climate change, recycling, saving energy and other green initiatives are now also commonly featured in the performance indicators of organisations and individuals.

This is where the leader thing really has traction. We need leaders from public private and the voluntary sectors who can describe the future as close up and who can place the status quo at a distance where it doesn't block our view. We need to let go of any anxiety about trying to predict the future and move instead to deciding what future we actually want to create.

Successful leaders love results. They focus on outcomes and consciously or subconsciously give people opportunities to learn and grow. They do not micro manage the work, they give people room to take responsibility and they are as interested in the people as they are in the process.

When you think about the leaders you have worked with, one or two may come to mind as people who played an important role in your development. It may have been in a positive context – constructive actions that have shaped your own approach or it may have been in a negative context – “whoa, I'll never behave like that when I move into a leadership role”.

When you ask effective leaders what has been important in their development; they talk about leaders they have worked with and the personal and professional challenges they have faced and overcome. Somewhere along the line their boss or their boss's boss took a risk with them for the sake of their learning. Whatever the story – it's all about stories; these effective leaders can point to at least one or two examples that are sharp in their memories as points of departure to a new level of confidence. Think about it... this probably resonates with your own experience.

Many of us have been stirred listening to a successful leader tell their story; regrettably far fewer of us have had the opportunity to actually work for one – an experience that can be both inspirational and life changing. The evidence for this is easy to find, just ask people and those who have had this experience can recount almost to the word some of the conversations that marked the way along their leadership path.

Let's be clear on something... It's not saying that courses and programmes aren't helpful. There are times in one's career where it is valuable if not vital to go back into a formal learning space to learn new models, to be exposed to fresh thinking and to network with peers. Indeed, the common experience reported by people working through executive programmes and education, is the value of intensive learning in the company of other managers and their shared experience. Leadership learning is a profoundly social activity.

The uncertainty we face in the current environment creates demand for effective leadership and the capability to manage change. Talented people are attracted to organisations where their talent will be recognised and where they will get leadership and growth. You hear it on the street... "I want to work at such and such, so and so is their CEO". Stakeholders and analysts also factor in the quality of leaders in their assessments, its part of the brand and its part of the gap between assets and market value.

The way leaders encourage people to think about their organisation and its purpose is critical. In reality what we need to understand is the sustainable proposition for building talent. Sustainable change occurs when leaders engage people in a compelling future that is better than their current reality and rally them to feel they are part of an achieving team. People want to feel the engagement and satisfaction that comes from being recognised as being part of something that works.

The most important contribution that leaders can give their people is a "vision" of what the organisation is all about, what it is trying to achieve and how it will do this. People want to know three things; what is the big picture, what's my part and how will I know how I'm going? Individuals make engagement choices based on the answers to these questions.

Vision statements count for nothing if leadership behaviour does not set an example and processes do not build trust and collaboration. Inconsistencies in behaviour means that management credibility disappears.

So where to from here? What do we need our leaders to do? It would seem that there are a few capabilities that stand out above the normal expectations. We need our leaders to demonstrate global and cultural literacy and we need an inclusive and open view of our place in the region and the world.

Leaders need to have fluency with ideas – story telling is a match winner for organisational leadership and people love hearing leaders talk about 'where we are going'. Today more than ever leaders need to understand and be proficient with technology – it's just a ticket to the game regardless of what sector we work in. Our leaders must be bold and have a bias toward opportunity and action with an ability to harness the power of networks.

In terms of practical actions a few ideas to progress are

- **Peak Experiences.** Ask leaders to identify the peak experiences that have shaped their development and look at how you can replicate these experiences for your people

- **Strengths.** Base development on identifying people's strengths and work on these to make them more of who they already are
- **Exposure to the big picture.** Shadow leadership team and/or skip level meetings - stories from senior leaders
- **Resourcing Strategy.** Develop a shared clarity about what leadership capability is needed now and in the medium and long term. Build a robust resourcing strategy – brand, sourcing, selection and measurement
- **Business processes.** Look at how hard or easy it is to get things done? What behaviour gets modelled and reinforced? What messages are conveyed by your rules on delegation; on liaison authority; on purchasing?
- **Values.** Conduct a values audit to determine if the organisation is being authentic with its values and identify opportunities for development

New Zealand needs leadership to help create our future and not just cope with but to take advantage of the opportunities emerging in the current global environment. To do this we need to be smarter about the way we develop and nurture our leadership capability.

History shows us that experience is only useful to the extent that the future is like the past. The future probably isn't what it used to be.