

## Leading in a Digital World

By Dr Simon N Davey, July 2019

*“There is a crack, a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.” – Leonard Cohen*

Plus ça change? Mais oui! The latest outing for CMCE (the Centre for Management Consulting Excellence) brought us two renowned speakers taking us through the new challenges of leadership. Why is the ‘new world’ different and what does it take to succeed?

Rachel Whitehouse provided some provocations to start with:

- AI is the new superpower, the new electricity
- 56% of the world population use the internet today, up from 0.4% in 1995
- We are in our fourth industrial revolution

### **Challenge! Opportunity! Speed!**

But do you remember an earlier time, a world of political and economic upheaval? No, not last week... think 1983. A world where phone and fax were still cutting-edge technology (and it was only 38 degrees in Dubai not Dartford). Nick Cowley of the Oxford Group took us on a journey (and history) of the why, what and how of leadership.

And to today (forgive me Jacob, I know these articles don’t meet the Rees-Mogg style guide of grammar and expression) – we live in a world where the challenge, opportunity and speed of technology exceed the human ability to deal with it. But are we resigned to be like the dinosaurs and fail to adapt, or can we gather and develop the knowledge (and attitude) we need and equip ourselves to be ready and able to deal with the disruption ahead?

We ought to be excited about the benefits and potential of the new order but the onus is on leaders to make change and set examples. We too often come up against the lack of familiarity, lack of competence and lack of agility of working with digital, higher up the leadership scale.

Should we be excited? Concerned? Expectant?

### **The challenges ahead and Adaptive Leadership**

There is a growing disruption (a veritable sea change) from the potential of technology – it requires agility and responsiveness (as Einstein said – same old thinking gives same old results and we can’t afford that). It requires creative thinking and new ways of working (but organisations struggle here and the structures get in the way). It requires trust and co-design (those ‘pesky’ millennials expectations are higher and different, more purpose focused as the offers of advancement and financial reward prove inadequate motivators).

Fundamentally it requires leadership at different levels – the new currency is open, humble and brave.

Two challenges arise in adaptive leadership.

- The technical challenge – straightforward (what’s the problem, what outcome do we want, how do we do it)
- The adaptive challenge – less clear (our world is unclear, we can’t define the problem, there is no obvious solution)

*“At the heart of the model is that idea that adaptation to the environment (one that is disruptive, challenging, uncertain, changing etc.) is driven by discomfort. In the animal world the hermit crab, that has a soft outer body, finds and uses a shell for its protection, and it is only when, as its body grows, and it experiences discomfort that it is triggered to look for another shell and discard its current one. Discomfort drives change and adaptation.”*



**Is this adaptive leadership?**

## **So how then?**

Well, we could get out of the day to day and ‘go out on to the balcony’ and think of the challenges rather than letting them creep up on us as the water boils the frog...

We can tune into the conflict and realise we need to turn up (or turn down) the heat/gas depending on circumstance – so called ‘situational’ leadership.

We can set the challenge and the conditions and let ‘them’ get on with it (as useful a recommendation to our clients as to leaders or teams) – hold the environment and grasp the nettle.

We can offer space to come up with an answer (offering our clients headspace is often an incredibly valuable contribution – as Drucker said, they know the answers, we just need to help them realise it.)

But let's face it, this is a long way from the 'command and control' hierarchies and bureaucracies of old, which still live on in businesses and non-profits of all sizes. It will, and does, require a massive change in culture and behaviours. As leaders, we need to create a 'grasping and squeezing environment'. We need to be provoking our own disruption, knowingly; creating our own catalyst for change. Poking the bear before it eats us anyway...



**Is this your idea of leadership?**

Nick talked us through the Oxford Group's model of potential: Drive – Ignite – Transform – Evolve and the 3A's model of 'ambitious, authentic and agile' leaders.

LEADING IN A DIGITAL AGE

## The Oxford Group model of potential



**Drive**

- Aspires to lead
- Passion to impact
- Engaged in the organisation



**Ignite**

- Harnesses available talent
- Creates conditions of engagement
- Creates and promotes connection and collaboration



**Transform**

- Innovates inside and out
- Disrupts blockages to success
- Handles ambiguity and complexity



**Evolve**

- Cultivates learning agility
- Builds and deploys resilience
- Turns self knowledge into collective success

We heard that leadership is a mindset, about courage and determination, rather than skill (and contrasts with performance management which is different). The challenge (and need) to recruit the right people (rather than just more of the same) and engage those current employees (and team members) with potential, as a contrast to just applying the principles of fairness and equality.

Critically we need to amplify:

- Mindset and identity – above skill;
- Collaboration and community – learning and sharing together, become ‘learn alls’ not ‘know alls’, understand our strengths and our limitations;
- Stretch and immersion – learn from stretching experiences and throw ourselves into a situation

We need to be authentic, open, vulnerable, passionate. We need to unlearn the things which block our progress and the progress of others and our organisations.

## **Find reverse?**

*“There’s a reason that dinosaurs no longer roam the earth: they couldn’t adapt to their changing environment. Many leaders today risk becoming fossils in the digital ecosystem if they can’t adapt to the changes happening...”*

How do you increase your market capitalisation by over \$5 billion in a day? Get the Federal Trade Commission to fine you just five billion dollars! Yes, Facebook got away more lightly than expected and grew in market capitalisation as a result.

Richard Horner talked to us about the new territories emerging all the time and the importance of reverse mentoring and championing.

Imagine you are a young bearded man (this was the 80s), working the night shift for Atari. You discover the circuit boards aren’t being soldered properly and you walk into the office to complain (and quite frankly be a bit difficult about it). And get fired. But perhaps that gives you a new opportunity? It did for Steve Jobs.

Jack Welch used young people at GE to teach the more senior staff what technology was all about.

The London Ambulance Service recently improved first response call handling from 68% to 98% in six weeks through a reverse mentoring scheme including more junior staff advising the COO.

Starbucks (whilst arguably not the best providers of coffee) recognised the ‘coffee face’ and the value of employee advocacy and positively encouraged baristas to open up their own social media and Instagram accounts to increase reach. No boundaries, just more customers and keeping it real.

Mindfulness champions in the London Ambulance Service have enabled a 19% increase in doctor's diagnosis speed and accuracy through improvements in visuospatial processing and better understanding needs.

'Reverse', and the assets it brings, helps with change, culture and wellbeing.

## Which leaves us where?

Our sessions wouldn't be the same without some final gems of wisdom and challenge from the floor. So what are the takeaways for leading in a digital world?

- The biggest challenge is the most senior people getting in the way of opportunity. The ones with vested interests and too much to lose if they risk a change (or everything to lose if they don't). Veritable rabbits in the headlights as we head for a crash.
- Leadership is about a personal journey, learning to be adaptive and senior figures have too often failed to do this.
- We can't be the same as yesterday and survive tomorrow.
- We need sufficient pressure.
- Sadly it's still a safer option to re-employ the idiot (also known as the 'Steve Bruce effect' in football circles).
- An MBA doesn't shift anything – perhaps we might rename it 'management by bugging about'

## And finally...

But we leave on a hopeful note. The dinosaurs did indeed die out (and who's to say the earthshattering event isn't coming) and in the words of the immortal Leonard Cohen, "There's a crack, a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in."

Time to look for the cracks but make sure you're out of the way of that asteroid when it hits...

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