

business

Sustaining Leadership in Challenging Times

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If we are to thrive in these times of global change and challenge, we need to discover ways of living that do not take from the earth as if its resources were limitless – they are not.

Inspiring and pioneering work being done in the areas of technology, design and architecture is making a marked difference to how we build our homes and run our businesses. Into this innovative mix we would be wise to address another, perhaps deeper issue. How are we to live in such a way as to sustain our own selves? What are the things which ground us, motivate, enliven and encourage us, and what might hold us back or drain our energy?

We need space to think about these things and plan a course of action we can maintain in the midst of life's uncertainties and surprises.

Leaders grow out of the community they are born into and both 'nature' and 'nurture' play a part in how a leader develops.

A bit like Michelangelo's sculpture of David carved out of rock, there is a deep beauty within us all; but we need to chip away at what is superfluous so a fuller, more authentic version of our selves can emerge.

Our lives are all part of the wider stories of our families, cultures and communities. Stories bring meaning and help bind people together with a sense of common purpose and identity.

Not all stories are helpful. They can sometimes have a limiting effect on us and stunt our potential to grow. Humility is a value I have both noticed and appreciated as a common theme in many of the stories hear from people.

In general, the Scots are keenly aware of their roots and where they've come from and rarely clamour to be noticed or praised.

But humility can have a shadow side, a side I was reminded about in a story a Highland fisherman told me.

A visitor was standing on the pier at Lochinver on a bright summer's day as a boat was unloading. As a basket full of crabs was being hauled from the boat to the pier, one intrepid crab was about to make his escape out of the basket, up the rope and into freedom.

The visitor spotted this and said to the fisherman, "Look, one of the crabs is about to escape."

The fisherman's reply was telling: "Don't you worry about that, these are Highland crabs. When one looks to have climbed further the others will reach up and pull him back down!"

Leaders need the courage to be different. They need that rare mix of both humility and confidence to do something different and perhaps reach further than the community they were born and brought up in might have thought possible or even acceptable.

And the tension will always be to do this while still identifying with their community.

Sometimes, challenging the stories we are told takes courage, is healthy, and allows a leader to develop their own reality. Take time just now to reflect on the stories that you have bought into. Which ones sustain and build you up and what stories may hold you back?

Sustaining ourselves as leaders comes from an ability to adapt to the changing systems we belong to. We need to

recognise and balance the 'doing' aspects of leadership - the actions and energy that help deliver results and achieve goals - with the 'being' dimension of leadership such as the ability to reflect, support yourself and others.

And it may be that, depending on the season and situation we find ourselves in, certain aspects of our leadership will be more evident than others.

"Leadership is creating a world to which people want to belong."
Gilles Pajao

Good leaders know how to live comfortably with this seeming paradox. They are confident enough to embrace interdependence with others and at the same time have a strong self awareness and are clear about their own identity.

The psychologist Carol Dwerk encourages leaders to develop a 'growth mindset.' This is a way of thinking which is not scared of challenge or failure and looks for opportunities to improve.

Take time now to identify what practices will support your leadership into the future. And in these challenging times, don't lose sight of what's important. What might we need to change so we continue growing? What behaviours, emotions and ways of thinking limit our personal growth? Don't be dictated by the tyranny of the urgent - pace yourself. Challenges can be physically tiring so be realistic about what you can and can't achieve. There is always tomorrow. What might we need to let go of and what new, fresh things could we find helpful to enable growth?

And remember, as the American politician Ralph Nader wisely put it – the purpose of leadership is to create more leaders, not more followers. ■

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