

Spacious leadership – how to balance direction with engagement

I was in discussion with a client who wanted to create a culture of empowerment. As we reflected, we found ourselves arguing with the concept of empowerment. Somehow it implies someone who holds the power generously deigning to share it with others. Does that really serve an organisation and make the most of the capacity that everyone has?

In my view **there is an apparent paradox in leadership - a polarity. On the one hand you need to provide direction, vision, and set boundaries and on the other engage and involve others and allow them the scope and freedom to act.** In my experience this can be a challenge in the transition from management to leadership. Team members frequently ask for direction, guidance and clarity of vision from their leaders – after all they are paid well enough, aren't they? They also gripe if not given sufficient scope, autonomy and accountability.

As anyone who has come across polarity theory will know, there are negative consequences to overemphasising either. The challenge is to find the creative third way which holds both sides of the polarity in balance.

In his book entitled Leadership Coaching, Graham Lee suggested that asking people about their parenting style can be insightful about leadership style (fine if you have children!). It is a challenge to know when to set boundaries, give guidance and direction and when to create the space to enable others to contribute their best thinking. In coaching or working with teams, I often encounter bright, articulate and capable individuals whose speed of thought can lead to frustration with others who can't seem to keep up and a tendency to come up with the 'right' answers. This can leave others feeling undervalued and mistrusted.

If you're glazing over thinking touchy, feely nonsense how does up to 30% more profit sound?

Gallup's extensive investigation into the correlation between organisation climate (what it feels like to work around here) and performance identified that the additional discretionary effort leads to significant increase in profits.

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What can leaders do to help hold both sides of the polarity in balance?

1. **Be aware – your version of reality is just that. It's not the truth.** (Have you ever had those completely different memories of an event – with a close friend or partner?).
2. **Be clear where the boundaries are and about giving direction** – your non negotiables. Don't pretend to consult if it's a done deal, you will just seem manipulative.
3. **Test whether your boundaries in the right place (or get a member of your team to challenge you).** If they are too tight, they will stifle creativity and discretionary effort). People will metaphorically fold their arms and say "If that's what you want then I'll give you that and no more"
4. **Create space and an environment which encourages high quality** thinking. This takes courage and inquisitiveness. Be more interested in asking why than judging and proving you are right. Simple techniques can work here – we use the tools from the Thinking Environment (see later in this newsletter) but you can try the 5 Whys process that Ricardo Semler talked about in his book Maverick. This can seem tough to do if like me your education stimulated the search for "the right answer". However, planting the thought in your mind 'I'm curious/ I'm interested' can often be enough to shift your attention.
5. **Set things up to continue without you.** Jim Collins wrote Good to Great after a substantial piece of research into what makes for sustained high performance in organisations. His team found that the charismatic 'knight on white charger' version of leadership lasts only as long as that leader is in place. Once leader leaves impetus gone. To create long term success, leaders combine humility with focus – what he calls level 5 leadership. They get the right people on the bus and only then does the team create a joint vision of success. This means they are all committed to it. The role of leader becomes steering, encouraging, recognising, and checking that the organisation is still heading in the right direction

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