



On Chickens and Leadership

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Writing on leadership for a public with a high percentage of experienced leaders is a challenge one should normally avoid. However, following the advice of the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert "If you have the choice between two paths, an easy one and a difficult one, you must always choose the difficult one", I'll pick up the glove. Enjoying the unpleasant privilege of having time to reflect on the years gone by, I distilled some of the events that proved to have an impact on how I see leadership and that I want to share with you. In the paragraphs below, I have summed them up in no specific order.

Keep It Simple

Recently a friend of mine suggested reading a book of a Nobel Prize winner. That was something new for me, as I related the writings of Nobel Prize winners with thick books on very specialized topics. I reluctantly started reading the small booklet, more a large article, 'The Nature of the Firm' written in 1937 by Ronald Coase¹. It offered an economic explanation on why individuals choose to form partnerships, companies and other business entities rather than trading bilaterally through contracts on a market. I found it quite astonishing that he received the prize in the category economics, although it took the committee until 1991 to realize its value, for such a simple explanation.

The second book was from the hand of Herbert A. Simon and bears the title 'Administrative Behavior: a Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administrative'. It asserts the simple concept that "decision-making is the heart of administration, and that the vocabulary of administrative theory must be derived from the logic and psychology of human choice". Simon received the Nobel Prize for Economics in 1978.

Although, the two scientists did more than writing a book, they are known for forwarding their simple, yet powerful idea. The idea of another, better known prize winner², Albert Einstein is even simpler yet it has a huge impact: $E = mc^2$.

The lesson identified? Keep it simple, big ideas are.

So if you need to accomplish something, keep your basic concept simple. Its application will be hard enough. Having a profound understanding of the basics, the theory, gives you great authority on the matter as you can always retrace to it in times of troubles. Of course you sometimes have to adapt its implementation to real life, but having a well-understood foundation, no problem is too hard.

¹ See also ThinkBox 'The Nature of the Military Organization'.

² The Nobel Prize in Physics 1921 was awarded to Albert Einstein "for his services to Theoretical Physics, and especially for his discovery of the law of the photoelectric effect".

Quinn's View

If you wonder who Robert Quinn is, well he's a professor and a researcher and is well known as an authority in the realm of change management. He has gained fame by his groundbreaking work on the 'Competing Values Framework' (the Quinn model), recognized as the most effective way to describe a company's culture. The Quinn model is based on four different management models that form the basis of organizational effectiveness. The management models stand in opposition to each other, but each of them is important in a well-functioning organization.

I've used the Quinn model several times, and experienced that most chefs and the HR department had no understanding of it. The model is useful, but I find Quinn's approach more interesting. It tells that there are different possible angles to look at a problem. No point of view is wrong and all have their solution. Physicists know that too when they for example study light: is it a wave or a beam of photons? You could compare it with the facet eye of a fly. Every part gives an impression of the reality and only by considering the whole the insect will understand its surroundings.

The realization that there is more than one truth is enriching and leads to the readiness to discover the other facets. It also explains how new approaches for management are popping up because they look at the problems from another angle but tend to forget to good solutions. This realization is also valid in regard to cultures. One tends to look at issues from one's culture and think there is only one possible angle to treat it, but there are more. Accepting that others may come up with equally valid approaches is very enriching.

The lesson identified? There is no single right, there are other truths out there.

Being able to understand and switch between different approaches, a bit like situational leadership, is a very useful capacity one should develop and maintain.

The Henhouse

Stories involving animals are an inoffensive way to illustrate lessons in management (or other domains for that matter)³. Early in my career a colonel for whom I have the greatest respect, compared my function as a flight commander with taking care of a henhouse.

To know how to manage the hens, you must divide them according a four-quadrant grid. The first axis of the grid concerns the productivity. In short you have hens that lay eggs and those that don't. The second axis is about the noise they make: some cackle, some keep quite.

Every quadrant houses a group of hens. In quadrant 1 you find the hens that lay eggs and cackle. You accept the noise and let them work. Quadrant 2 houses those that don't produce anything and cackle. These are the prime candidates for a chicken stew. The quadrant 3 hens lay no eggs and keep quiet are best for a chicken salad. However, as they do not cackle they are much harder to find than those in quadrant 2. The hens in the last quadrant are also quiet, but productive. Your mission is to find those and to take good care of them.

The lesson identified? Do not forget the hard, but silent workers.

³ See also the ThinkBox story 'The Kingdom of the Grey Mice'.

According to this diagram, you will always have people who make noise. Whatever you do or change, there will be rumors and complaining. The group of cackling hens will make sure you hear them. So you don't have to worry about them or their noise unless they keep quiet. As a leader you should focus on the productive ones who don't complain or give comments, because this group needs extra care.

The Hammering Engineer

As with the henhouse, the following story also dates from my early days. It was a custom to start the work after the morning coffee. I considered those first minutes of the day as the ideal opportunity to meet my group to make sure that all understood the work of the day. However, on paper the time spend on the first coffee was time 'wasted' because no work was done. It so happened that my commander wanted to see work activity from the first minute. Not agreeing with his approach but determined to execute the order, I consulted with my section chiefs. I expected some resistance, but after explaining the wish of the commander they agreed that it would be done as from tomorrow.

Next morning, I was standing on the balcony overlooking the hangar. Next to me the commander. Just before the start of the workday, somebody opened a door and went from his shop to another across the open maintenance space. Somewhere we heard another engineer busy hammering. The commander smiled and said: "You see that it can be done."

I heard and saw the same things, but I did not believe it. Change is not that easy. I went downstairs to look for the working engineer and found him sitting in a helicopter pointlessly hammering on some piece of metal. He explained me that his chief had told him to make some noise before he had his first coffee. Then I walked to the shop where the first engineer had entered and saw him chatting with his colleagues. Not doing any work. After I told the chiefs what I had discovered, they explained me that, because the boss wanted them to be busy form the start of the day, they had come up with a plan to look busy.

The lesson identified? What you see (or hear) is not what you get.

You should always be careful with what you observe or measure. Certainly, if you request something without motivating the people to do it, you may end up with a nice looking but empty shell.

Grass Doesn't Grow By Pulling On It

If somebody is requesting an extra effort from a group of people, I always ask how he or she plans to motivate them. In most cases their answer can be summarized by 'they will do it'. But motivation isn't something magical out of thin air. I've got the impression that some people believe that pushing the function key F13 will do the job. News flash, there is no F13 on your keyboard!

Others will do efforts to get rid of demotivation. Probably because that's an easy way out giving a good feeling to the one implementing it. But like Hertzberg taught us, eliminating demotivation does not equal motivating a person. Not being ill does not mean having a good life.

Like grass, motivation must be cultivated. It doesn't grow by pulling on it. It needs taking care of. Provide it with fertile ground, treat it well, feed it, give it water ... and you be rewarded with a nice green field able to resist harsh times.

The lesson identified? Motivating people is hard, continues work that few really understand, but it pays in the long run.

You have to motivate people to get them committed to change. The best change agents have come on their own to the conclusion that change is the best option. Maybe because the platform where they are standing on is burning or the white beach on the other side looks very attractive. Whatever the reason, they are internally motivated to swim the distance.

The Glass Door

Some organizations struggle with a glass ceiling. This kind of invisible stop on career advancement for women and minorities is known, although we have to admit that eliminating it is harder than it seems.

Like most leaders, I was aware of the existence of such a ceiling although at my level I did not have to worry about it. What I did not know was the existence of another blockage, the glass door.

My door was, and still is, always open. And that was also what I told everybody in my unit. They could always step into my office for a chat. If the timing was not right, I would tell them and fix another moment to discuss. My open door policy didn't mean that I always would act on what was told even if I could. No, I would start by informing the first responder to facilitate a solution if necessary and only act if all else failed. I trusted my policy worked fine.

After a meeting, a colleague made me aware that I had wrongfully blamed one of my officers because she hadn't received any guidance and as a newcomer lacked the experience to tackle the issue correctly. Accepting the critique, I asked why the flight commander hadn't stepped in my office to ask for advice. My door was always open. The reply was both simple and shocking: I was her commanding officer.

The lesson identified? Although you adopt an open door policy, there may be a glass door in the doorway invisible to you but very tangible for the members of your team.

Being made aware, I, supported by my direct collaborators, started an active campaign to promote the idea of the 'open door'. As for the young officer, I had a chat with her and started to coach her on a regular basis. The latter thing I, as her squadron commander, should have started from the beginning.

Who's the Group Commander?

While I was overlooking the activity on the work floor my Group Commander came next to me. After the usual greetings, he started telling the following story:

"The years as a flight commander are the best of your career. It will take you a year or two to learn the tricks of the job. In your third year you will reach full potential after which you will be transferred to the staff.

If you're lucky, after a few years they will send you back to a unit as a squadron commander. You will remember the fun times as a flight commander and now you return to at least three of them. A great time awaits you. After two years you will discover what the job of a squadron commander really is

about. You stop (micro)managing the flights and focus on the squadron. Unfortunately, your tour is almost over and soon you will return to some desk job.

Things are going well and you get the chance to return as a group commander. You now know the job of a squadron commander and are determined to make up the lost time. And of course, not one but three squadrons are awaiting you.

I ask you: who's the Group Commander?"

The lesson identified? Do not think that your new job is the previous one at the next higher level.

When I took up my job as a squadron commander, I've told this story to my flight commanders. Then I told them that I, like in the story, had a lot of experience in their function and that, although I know the story too, I will have the urge to do their job that I know so well. It was their duty to slap on my fingers the moment I played flight commander and to remind me that I was the squadron commander.

Epilogue

Of course, I have more moments with a lesson identified, and I'm not even sure if I have captured the most influential ones. There may be even moments that have influenced me more than I'm willing to admit or that I'm aware of. However, I hope that some of my moments will help to improve your leadership skills or that they initiate you to think about your leadership moments.