LEADERSHIP - HOW FAR WILL YOU GO?

ABSTRACT

Over the last 50+ years my teams and I have delivered billions of dollars' worth of change in diverse industries including construction, water and waste-water, ICT, business development and improvement, regional and community enhancement, security, safety and training.

During those years I've met incredible people and had such people in my teams who have gone beyond the basics of their role descriptions to ensure that goals and objectives were achieved within the vision required that I encouraged them to help form. They were fantastic leaders in their own right!

The following stories, hints and tips are drawn from those experiences with diverse people, some of whom thought initially that activities required of them were impossible – but, they learned to learn with the help of the rest of our team members.

It is my hope that these words might inspire you to put your dreams into action and develop the self-motivation needed to exceed your expectations. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter what others think of you but rather what you think of yourself. However, to influences others you need to remember your humanity as well as theirs; and positively take them on a journey with you to achieve great things.

Neville Garnham

An Unexpected Request

"I want you to approve this for me!" she said emphatically.

Nadia placed the form she'd signed on the desk in front of me. It wasn't a form that I was particularly familiar with, but its title said it all: Application for Confined Space Training. *"Tell me more?"* I replied.

I'd allocated to Nadia an approved project about internal refurbishment of a water reservoir that was 100 metres in diameter and hadn't been opened since it had been built 80 years previously. I've always argued that people need end-to-end experience of projects (not just parts of them) and Nadia in her 20s had embraced this philosophy with enthusiasm.

It was now that Nadia argued with conviction that if she was to procure the correct services contractor to perform the work and she was to manage the contract, then she needed to know exactly what was inside that reservoir that needed to be fixed. It was a no-brainer from my perspective, but I knew that many of the males on my team would not have adopted this approach. They would have relied on what the prospective contractors told them.

Towards the end of our conversation, Nadia added: *"Thanks for signing! But, in fact I think all members of our team should do Confined Space Training. It'd give them a better understanding of risk and associated costs!"*

"I can't argue with that," I said, *"Do you want to organise it?"* Nadia was never afraid of delegated extra work.

Within a couple of hours Nadia came back to me with the form for group training. Everyone in the team knew what was being proposed and no-one was reluctant to undertake the training. As I signed the form, Nadia added casually *"Of course, I've also added your name to the list of trainees!"* We smiled and knew it was agreed between us.

[So, I'm now confined space trained in the theory but cannot do the practical unless or until I shave off this beard that prevents proper respirator usage. That won't happen soon!]

Nadia went into that reservoir with the organisation's engineers and prospective contractors. She knew through firsthand experience the amount of concrete cancer that existed in the internal pillars of the huge tank. She sought and got the right contractors to undertake the work and managed the contract superbly. Would you do that? ◯

Taking Heat Out of Complaints

Several decades ago, while working for a local government, I received a phone call one Friday.

The caller was considerably upset about a problem that had apparently been batted around between our engineers and town planners, none of whom had gone out to inspect the problem or meet with the upset local residents. The caller now wanted to lodge a formal complaint. That's how he got to me. I hadn't heard about the problem previously.

After listening carefully to his detailed description of the problem, I asked him *"Look, how about I come out and have a look so that you can describe the situation completely to me and I'll have a better understanding about how we can deal with it?"*

He was naturally dismissive in that no-one had come out to site-see the problem for some alleged three months that they had been phoning the council. Then, with ultra-dismissiveness he added: *"Well! It's Friday and I can't get everyone together today. And besides, you damn public servants won't come out at any time other than during business hours!"*

Calmly, I said *"Name a time and a place."* Promptly he replied *"This Sunday morning corner of ... [the streets we'd been talking about]... at 7 o'clock!"*

To this I replied: *"Ok. I'll see you all there then!"*

Immediately, he back-pedalled and said *"You're kidding me!"*

I assured him that I wasn't. He changed the time to 9 o'clock on that Sunday morning.

That's when we met. The matter was fixed within a couple of weeks. Action to listen and learn helps! ◯
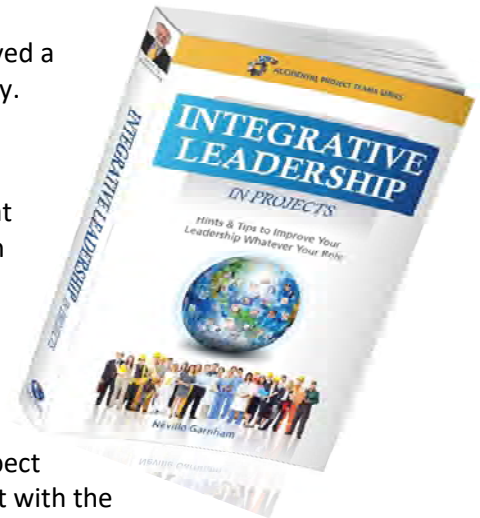
Inflated Egos

A friend who undertakes forensic analysis of projects that have "gone wrong" tells a story of a project that went wrong, without revealing the details that would identify the project or the people involved.

The project cost the business $6 million more than really needed to be spent. The primary cause of that over-expenditure was *"the ego clash"* between two senior executives of the company. Research in other companies supports similar findings with clear indications that the people composing the team have a direct impact on effectiveness and efficiency and thereby profits.

Others want to suggest that there is no place in any team for the ego of individuals. I disagree strongly. In my view, teams are ineffective if they are subjected to one or more unfettered egos in the team. This includes those who consistently and persistently criticise others in the team without trying to understand *"why they do things the way they do them"* or fail to act collaboratively to help solve the other person's challenges, which might have been imposed on them rather than being of their own making.

A well-formed solid ego is crucial to each of us, but such an ego must contain a great serving of humility within it, recognizing thereby the value of every other person on this planet and the respect due to them: as well as having proper respect for all other members of the team.

Strong egos on a team enhance the chances of objectives being achieved provided all egos are constrained to the objectives of the team purpose be that in projects or operational teams or anywhere else (sport included). Egos are or become a problem when they become focused on *"me-objectives"* rather than on team objectives.

How solid and humanly healthy is your ego? ◯

Taste Your Words

Whatever you say cannot be unsaid!

Have you noticed this fact? Have you met people who seem only to open their mouth to change feet, or to put their other foot in it as well? Words are powerful weapons, if misused!

We've become so persuaded about having an opinion, about *"communicating"* verbally, about expressing our opinion that we've swamped and suppressed our abilities to pick up non-verbal cues from other people.

Would it surprise you to learn there is evidence that herds of horses in paddocks communicate through twitching and positioning their ears? Still not properly understood animal behaviours include signals of communication to others of their species, especially in hunting.

Do you realise that we humans can scan our environment at better than 72 scans per second: giving us information about other humans we see? Yet, we continue to think that it's about the words spoken.

As Dr Stephen Covey said, in **The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People**: *"Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply. They're either speaking or preparing to speak. They're filtering everything through their own paradigms, reading their autobiography into other people's lives."*

Similarly, in the words of Professor Dalton Kehoe *"meaning is in the person and not in the words."*

Do you wish you might have read the verbal cues first; and, left unsaid something that you said to someone or said in front of a group?

Taste your words first. See how they might feel if they were being said to you personally or about you in front of a group by someone else. ◯

Counter-productive Blame Games

Have you come across people who'll give you all kinds of "reasons" (excuses) why something didn't get done?

Often, the reasons will centre on what "someone else" didn't do or being overloaded. What those people say may very well be correct. But, did they check-up prior to the deadline, did they try to find a different solution, did they help the other person achieve the deadline (sometimes even by talking to them or simply listening as they work through a solution or agree a re-prioritization).

Shifting-the-monkey to be someone else's fault is completely non-productive and doesn't foster a committed working relationship. It's also not leadership – personal or positional.

Do you always do what you say you will do?

If something gets in the way of you completing it as promised, do you explain what has happened to the other person before the deadline occurs?

If something goes wrong do you try to find out the facts before you fire off accusations against someone else?

On one occasion I was leading one part of multi-faceted team that was a three-way relationship. Let's call them A, B and C. For the sake of simplicity my group was C and I was drawn into a very heated set of accusations by a member of team A against one of my team C staff members.

It was a Monday. The team A member was heatedly accusing my team member of having not sent out something that was crucial on the previous Friday for the progress of a procurement. His language was unnecessarily upsetting to my female member of staff as he had a vindictive streak towards females. My staff member would have bent over backwards to help anyone achieve their objective; so, I knew it couldn't possibly have been her fault.

At the end of the day, it turned out the team A member had agreed with the team B member on the previous Friday week that the team B member would provide required information and documents to my team member on the previous Monday, which she would then be able to process and send out on the Friday prior to the day of conflict.

The team B member forgot to do so; and neither the team A member nor the team B member (who also disliked women) had given my team member any hint that something was forthcoming to her. They were both rather sheepish when I insisted that each of them apologize to my staff member.

I suspect their apology was more low-key than I would have liked for my staff member who advised me later that they had apologised. But, she was not the sort of person to create any fuss and told me to let "sleeping dogs lie!" ◯

Justa Mentality

Do you suffer from *"Justa Mentality"*? Have you never come across it? Have you never been subjected to it? How does it feel? Do you not know what I'm talking about? Think of this...

"Why should I ask Mary-Jane what she thinks! She's justa-shop-assistant!" You can substitute virtually anyone's name and virtually any job, role or profession into that sentence and, if you listen carefully in the right circumstances, you hear it said often with indignation. These petty jealousies exist inside professions just as much as they exist between professions and in the general population of everyday people.

"Concrete is concrete!" an electrical-mechanical engineer told me once in a post-grad lecture when he was disparaging civil engineers. I had to dissuade him of that view in just the same way that *"stainless steel isn't stainless steel"*. They each have grades. People are different. You need to understand the differences to collaborate with people.

Not so many years ago I worked with an engineer. I'd come to talk to him about a certain matter; and, as I'd arrived I heard him being abused furiously by another person. When he saw me, he invited me to sit and tell him what he could do to help me. But I was very distracted by the abuse I'd witnessed and wanted to know if it happened often and how he dealt with it.

Reaching into his desk drawer, he took out a piece of paper. On it he'd written a categorisation of how he undertook work for various people. I've no space here to give you all details; but broadly he'd put people into 5 categories. Category 1 were the people who treated him politely, said *"please"* and *"thank you"*, asked rather than demanded, and generally treated him as another human being under pressure. Those people got their work finished by him as quickly as possible.

I'd let you imagine the intervening categories down to Category 5 where the people treated him in exactly the opposite way to those in Category 1. The work for these people keep going to the bottom of the pile, no agreement would be given to them as to when their work would be finished; and, when finally, it had to be done, he'd find every possible failure on their part to specify exactly what they wanted and find problems with being able to complete it.

You might want to claim this is poor behaviour. He got away with it because he was very much a specialist in his electrical engineering field and few could emulate him. If you care to think about it, we all do the same sort of thing, but the categories are in our heads.

We all work more easily with those we get along with. We avoid or somehow are slower working for/with the people we don't like. It's worse if those people have treated us badly.

Sometimes, we need to stop and think why we don't like those other people: image, prejudices, slights of treatment, brusqueness, or a whole host of other behaviours or attitudes we don't understand or like in those people for whatever reasons! ◯