

“ The nature of Inspiring leadership”

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Background

Leaders in our time face numerous challenges: they are expected to achieve outstanding business results, must have a clear vision for the company, they must generate team spirit and have a concern for people. On top of all these demands we expect our leaders to be inspiring people. Employees, especially the younger ones, want their leaders to be human beings, not supermen and women. Rather, they look for people they can identify with.

But what does it mean to be an inspiring leader? Some theories claim that inspiring leaders are excellent speakers, people who convince by using appealing images and eloquent language (Gardner, 1995) Other theories say that inspiring leaders are driven by a strong vision. They work actively towards their goals and deal with barriers in an optimistic and energetic way (Spitzer, 2000) According to Vaill (2000), inspiring leaders concentrate on the process of purposing : giving meaning to the circumstances and events at work.

Inspiration

When dealing with the nature of inspiring leadership, we need to start with the notion of inspiration. What is inspiration? And what does it mean in a business context?

Literally, being inspired means being filled with life force. Inspiration is the experience of life force flowing through one's body. Artists know that inspiration is a rare moment of being fulfilled by something greater than oneself. It is a gift from the muses, from divine sources or from God.

Inspiration therefore is not something that we can control. Contrary to what many managers would like to believe, inspiration cannot be used as a management tool. It is not something that can be applied as an instrument, we cannot add it to an already existing business strategy or otherwise implement in the organisation.

Can leaders generate inspiration? Is it something one can create and then give away to others?

I believe that inspiration is something that can be nourished but that originates elsewhere. It is something that we can learn to open ourselves up to. In this sense, inspiring leadership is fundamentally different from motivational leadership.

Inspiration versus motivation

Motivation theories which were developed in psychology have helped managers to understand and influence the behaviour of their employees. To motivate means literally: to give arguments, to convince another of the logic or reason of a certain action. Motivation is derived from Latin and means : to set in motion.

Many psychologists have researched the factors that set people in motion. Maslow (1954) presented his needs hierarchy of human being. It is no use for organisations to provide opportunities for development if the physical and social needs of their employees have not been met. Even today, one of the popular ways to motivate people is to offer attractive material employment benefits. This may trigger some people but in general material benefits are not sufficient to create a motivated workforce.

McGregor (1960) pointed out that the leader's view of employees is a crucial factor in motivating people. An encouraging and supportive attitude works better than correction and punishment. Hackman and Oldham (1976) have described a number of task characteristics, some of which (such as autonomy) have the potential to bring the employee in a psychological state in which desired output can be achieved. Yukl (1994) sees motivation as an influence tactic focussed on enhancing the employees' self confidence which will increase their effectiveness in achieving the goals. In this respect the distinction between intrinsic (from within the person) and extrinsic motivation (factors from outside the person) is often made.

Managers have these insights from the psychological domain to influence employees' behaviour and to influence their self-confidence. It has become a technique to install a certain effect, such as creating a more entrepreneurial attitude among staff or a stronger focus on results among young employees.

Recent scholars have pointed to the counterproductive effects of motivation techniques. "To motivate is to demotivate" (Sprenger, 1992) Motivation techniques ignore the fact that people are in themselves motivated to work. Even people who have earned enough money to retire at an early age, or those who win a lottery, usually go on working in one way or another. Leaders who try to motivate their workers usually focus on ten percent of their workers who are cynical and demotivated. In the process they frustrate ninety percent. Especially professionals, knowledge workers, people in the service industry (nowadays the major part of the workforce), are usually inherently motivated by the nature of the work they do. They love to be in contact with clients and colleagues, they face and resolve problems independently, they take decisions and invent ways of improving the efficiency of their work. In this way they can bring their whole self, their mind, hands, heart and soul to their work. They are - in general - very motivated. They do not need motivation from their leader. Rather, they want their leader to be at least as inspired by the job as they are.

There are other objections to the use of motivation as a management tool to set others in motion. One is that motivation speaks to the reasonable mind. An underlying assumption is that if I can present fair arguments, provide honest information and explain the facts, that the other person will change their mind and accordingly, their behaviour. Employees may be inclined to follow their leaders logic and change their behaviour, but without heart and soul. They will therefore change their behaviour only in a superficial way. Another objection could be raised around the leader. In motivating, it is irrelevant if the manager himself is motivated. It is a rather impersonal technique. Often, these techniques, such as appreciation, are used in a manipulative and condescending way, not from a genuine acknowledgement of the other person. People are unique and to motivate people is to really meet and interact with the other person. Impersonal techniques (such as a bonus system for the whole staff) create a gap between leader and employee. Sprenger (1994) pointed out that the leader is often the biggest demotivator. People change jobs because of their boss, they withhold their qualities because they feel exploited by their boss, they withdraw their commitment because they see the calculative behaviour of their bosses.

Inspiring leadership: an alternative

Bolman & Deal (1995) point to the fact that the focus on rationality and control have overshadowed the essence of leadership, which lies in the heart of the leader. For them, hope, trust, courage and being inspired by something bigger than the ego are characteristics of inspiring leaders. Chappell (1993) focusses on the intuitive powers of the leaders. To what extent do leaders have the courage to put aside rational analysis and open us to the greater human spirit, the collective consciousness. A leader should find his own path in becoming their true self. They need to focus on their dreams and overcome the inner obstacles to living that dream full heartedly. Leaders must learn to be their true selves (Jaworski (1996, Moxley, 2000) Other authors speak of authenticity (Barrett 1998, Whyte, 1994, Owen 1999, Rabbin, 1998). True leaders have nothing to hide.

Inspired leaders look for other ways to have people commit themselves to their work. Rather than focussing on inventing techniques these leaders protect and foster working conditions that allow employees to be inspired in their job. If people are already motivated, one could look for ways to strengthen that. Instead of trying to motivate others, leaders could focus on what it is that already inspires their co-workers. What is it that they get up for in the morning? What is it they are trying to create in their environment and why is that important to them? Which values are driving their actions? What do they stand for in their work and private lives?

Also, inspired leaders might want to investigate in what ways they are demotivating their staff. Many organisations require their staff to do lots of administrative paper work without making use of these files. Most organisations have an incredible amount of procedures, many of which have lost their purpose. In many organisations decision making processes take unnecessary long steps and feedback loops are slow. All these phenomena can be source of frustration for inspired employees.

Inspiring leadership is more of an effect of someone who is inspired than an intended outcome. "Inspiring leaders are inspired leaders who do not consider that which inspires them as a means to achieve something else, rather, they are fundamentally interested in the matter itself. (De Dijn, 1999) Here is a

critical difference between inspiration and motivation. Motivating others is often used as a tool in order to achieve something else. Inspiring others is the (often unintended) effect of people who are intrinsically interested in something that they believe in, be it a vision for the company, values one is committed to or an ideal one is striving for.

Charismatic leadership

Inspiring leadership is often confused with charismatic leadership. Charismatic leaders are people who appeal to others because of their personality, their physical appearance, their humor or their wit. Charismatic leadership often comes up in times of crisis or problems and offers attractive (and often radical) solutions to these issues. (Weber, 1957) They are capable of winning their employees' trust by installing hope for a better future.

It is the personality of charismatic leaders that makes people look up to them, admire them, project their desires on them. One of the consequences of charismatic leadership - and indeed a difference with inspiring leadership - is the tendency to create followers. People, faced with social insecurity, tend to place their faith in those leaders which seem to point to a way out of the crisis. It is not their inspiration but their loyalty that is called forth by a charismatic leader. Such people, like Le Pen in France or Fortuyn in the Netherlands are not inspired individuals, but often personalities who are hungry for power and attention. Their leadership often stems from insecurity and is a way of becoming someone (Gardner, 1995) Many founders of companies are charismatic leaders. They were very capable of drawing other devoted people around them. The flip side of the coin is that these leaders have often left a gap in their company after their departure. Only then did it become clear that it was the leader's personality and not spirit itself that was driving the business.

One could say that inspired leaders are inspired by something that transcends their personality. Gandhi had devoted himself to the cause of a free India, a cause for which he sacrificed many personal needs.

A paradox for inspired leaders is the tension between their own inspiration and that of other people. Inspired people can become obsessed with the causes or values that inspire them. This may narrow their view of may make them blind for the inherent inspiration of others.

An inspired business manager who stands for sustainability and ethical entrepreneurship may walk over others who may be inspired by taking care of vulnerable people such as children.

Inspirational leaders do tap into people's own inspiration and tend to strengthen people's desires for the fire inside themselves. They wake up the flame inside. Martin Luther King spoke to the unexpressed desires in the hearts of many black Americans. He spoke to what he knew was dormant in their souls. It was waking up what was already there, rather than imposing something new on people.

Research

The purpose of my research is to develop a sense of the power and nature of inspiration, to apply this insight to inquire what inspiration means for existing leaders and for the new generation of leaders. When working with training groups I also focus on the experiential level: how does it feel to relate to other people out of your heart and soul. What differences do we experience when we are faced with someone who is inspired and interested in our sources of inspiration, compared to a motivational approach from someone trying to convince us of the validity of their point of view?

Another source of information in my research is reflection on people who have inspired many others in and what these they have brought about in these people's lives.

Inquiring into our own lives will bring up images of inspiring leadership, it helps us to reflect on the nature of such leadership. Rather than defining what it is, I intend to create a dialogue and an inquiry into the depths of how human beings can inspire one another.

One of my propositions about inspiring leadership is that inspiring leaders are themselves inspired. You cannot inspire others if you are not inspired yourself. Inspired leaders are not interested in a cause in order to achieve something, they are interested in a cause for no other reason than that they love it, their heart is in it, they are moved by it. Following this statement, the participants in the workshop will investigate what it is that inspires them.

Another proposition is that inspiring leaders foster the inspiration of others. One of the risks of being inspired is becoming obsessed with what inspires you. This may narrow one's view on the world. Another risk would be to believe that one has found the ultimate truth. One's inspiration could become a dogma, that is no longer open to discussion or development. Thus, an inspiring leader could become a sort of guru. How can one strike a balance between living out one's own inspiration and nurturing the inspiration of others?

In the conference workshop participants will inquire to what extent they know what inspires the people around them. What is it that inspires your co-workers and employees ?

One might argue that some people are not inspired at all, they just work for their salary. Although money is certainly a good reason for most of us, it seldom is the only reason. Let's inquire deeper in why we think our people come out of bed in the morning and come to work?

In the workshop we will work with one another to experience the kind of conversation that brings inspiration to the surface. We will close the workshop with conclusions, insights and suggestions for further exploration.

About the author

Drs. Lenette Schuijt (1959) has been a management trainer for more than twenty years. Lenette leads leadership development programs, consults on organisational change and helps management teams to work from their vision and values. She is based in the Netherlands, but works with international companies throughout Europe.

The main focus in her programs is on meaningful work and leadership that makes a difference. She is the author of several books, such as "De Kracht van Bezieling" (1999) on the power of inspiration for individuals and for organisations and "Met Ziel en Zakelijkheid" (2001) on paradoxes in 21st century leadership, such as being a visionary leader and at the same time delegating responsibility and being a coach. More information : www.crystalriver.nl