

Welcome to the Inquirer, a fortnightly Newsletter highlighting insights and new ideas about organisational leadership. In these lean challenging times, moments for reflection are at a premium. The Inquirer offers bulletins to support your agile leadership and your development of agile organisations. Please do feel free to share this open source Newsletter with colleagues and to join our continuing Public Leadership Inquiry and conversation with leaders on www.publicleadershipinquiry.com

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We adore being right, says Karen Schulz in her new book, Being Wrong. So much so that we strive to avoid error and go to extreme lengths to assure ourselves that we are right "first we assume that others are ignorant, then idiotic, finally evil" which can lead to damaged relationships, rubbing people, discarding great ideas which challenge orthodoxies and even creating gulags. To err is essential to human cognition and she scans across philosophy, politics and comedy to illustrate human fallibility. Schulz argues that we are wrong about being wrong a 'meta-mistake.' We enter a state of denial where we cannot accept the truth of our error eg Thabo Mbeki on aids. This can be framed as a normal response to the trauma of being wrong. As Sartre wrote, to deceive myself "I have to know this truth very precisely in order to hide it from myself the more carefully." Being wrong is experienced as shameful.

Surprisingly, Schulz is optimistic - error is both a given and a gift. Used well, it can help us to develop healthy scepticism, where we interrogate our own beliefs and constructs - "we get things wrong because we have an enduring confidence in our own minds and we face up to that wrongness in the faith that, having learned something, we will get it right next time." However, this is a 'cognitive luxury' requiring time, brains and patience. In the wider context, today's theories are held because we have disproved the old ones. It holds therefore that today's theories in medicine, economics, education, and management - will be disproved also. Being wrong is important for progress.

PLi comment: Schulz gives us insight into why it is so hard to foster learning in individuals as well as in organisations. The big implications for leaders trying to build agile organisations is that they need to factor in time, brains and patience to examine how they think, interact with others and create the habits/practices necessary for developing an agile, dynamic culture. They need to embrace error in the business, not to encourage it, but to exploit all the learning it offers. Leaders need to model a curiosity about their 'rightness,' not to paralyse decision making, but to search continually for ways of checking assumptions, building on ideas (rather than rejecting them because they are 'wrong') and unleashing the depth of intellectual resources in their business.



Innovation and agility that you don't expect, by Robin Ryde

At a recent meeting in New York of key innovators across the public and commercial sector, Jon Bidwell, Chief Innovation Officer at Chubb, shared some interesting research from the Desai Group that found that 75 per cent of successful innovation efforts came as the result of unplanned activities (either internal or external), and only 5 per cent of innovation successes were the result of internal, planned innovation activities. This of course would lead you to believe that while diligently pursuing innovation is important, most successful innovations are going to bubble up outside your normal, formal development processes.

Back in the UK, Chris Rodgers, author of a fascinating book *Informal Coalitions*, offers a similar view "What we talk of as organisations are social phenomena. They comprise people in relationship with one another. They are also constructed phenomena. That is, people get together and 'make things up', making sense of what's going on and, through this relational process, deciding what things mean and how they will act... and it's through the widespread interplay of these local conversations and interactions that coalitions of support for change are built".

Both sets of ideas move our attention away from the formal and the planned towards the informal and the unplanned. And it is in this space that John Bidwell and Chris Rodgers might argue that the real change happens. And what of the implications for helping organisations to become more lean and agile?

PLI Comment: Recent 'Open Inquiries' undertaken by PLI have pointed firmly towards the role that leaders can play in raising levels of organisational agility by fostering, and paying much more attention to, 'organic interactions'. Much like the observations provided by John Bidwell and Chris Rodgers we look to frame the organisation not as a machine that is driven by formal, planned, 'mechanical' interventions (and in our language we often talk of 'levers'), but to frame the organisation as an organism. And taking this perspective, it is in the naturally occurring conversations that the action happens; where ideas are exchanged at incredible pace, made sense of, grabbed hold of and turned into action. As social networking grows exponentially and, as an example, Facebook sets off on the next leg of its journey from half a billion to a one billion users, we are reminded of how important and central to our lives conversation, chat and natural dialogue is. And when we contrast this with the densely written change plans, and the cold, static, strategy documents it does make us think twice about where we, as leaders, spend our time.

So if we want organisational agility the truth will be found 'out there' as we engage with people interacting with one another as they in turn exchange ideas and determine what matters most. And if we are looking for ways of being agile and innovative in the black and white documents that sit quietly in the folders on the computer in front of us, we may just be looking in the wrong place.



The Leadership Tools and Mindset of Crisis Management, by Julian Powe

Huge, merciless crises of nature have been in all our minds in the last few weeks, first Christchurch and now, horrifyingly, Japan.

There have been many heroes amidst the chaos. For instance, the Mayor of Christchurch, Bob Parker, has cut a strong, thoughtful figure. One of his recent statements caught the eye - "It is all hands to the pump. There is absolutely no difference between those with uniforms and hard hats and those without. This is happening to us all."

Recent experiences of managing major crises have exerted a significant influence in public service thinking about developing more agile organisations. For instance, Australian public service leaders have absorbed the learning from the response to the Victorian bush fires that resulted in untold damage to property and livelihoods two to three years ago. They noticed how their work, in close partnership with many different agencies, was characterised by a spirit of 'can do', 'generosity', 'collaboration', and 'outcomes over rules'. And they have consciously built this into their prospectus for agile public service organisations.

PLi comment: At our most recent Open Inquiry on 'Leading Agility', senior public servants articulated some potential practices in making more regular use of the leadership tools and mindset of crisis management, including:

- *"Ratchet up the sense of 'can do'"*
- *"Make a habit of the communication habits of crisis management such as regular brief stand up meetings for the whole team"*
- *"Avoid the 'default mode' of a crisis. Reduce the anxiety levels and create the safe space"*

Public Leadership Inquiry is a bold research and consulting enterprise devoted to understanding and strengthening leadership and organisational change.

At the heart of our work is a focus on helping organisations to become AGILE and LEAN - two critical features of success for modern organisations. We look to the real-world experiences of leaders and undertake research that delivers insights, "know how" and the strategies needed to be agile and lean. We bring particular value to complex organisational challenges, in fact the more complex they are, they more we can help.

PLi was co-founded by Sue Duncan, former Government Chief Social Researcher; Robin Ryde, author & former CEO of the National School of Government; Steve Turner, executive coach and board level leadership advisor; and Julian Powe, employee engagement expert and board level change management advisor.