

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

“I helped Maia and Maia helped me”...the leadership behaviours that support agility, by Julian Powe

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The older we get, the brainier we become, by Steve Turner

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As they seek to encourage their organisations to become more agile, leaders are fostering strong organic interaction across their organisations, stimulating quality conversations - strategic, creative, curious, and experimental - that give rise to breakthrough ideas and breakthrough execution of those ideas.

Success here requires strong alignment of the organisation around the strategy, and a powerful sense of accountability for its delivery. And it also requires deep bench strength in the attitudes, behaviours and skills that support the establishment and maintenance of those sparky, innovative, mutually supportive and goal-oriented working relationships that drive breakthrough performance.

The purpose of this bulletin is to remind leaders of three seminal works to support them in this enterprise, as they personally model these attitudes, behaviours and skills, and encourage them to take root in their organisations.

1. Helping

In his 2009 book ‘Helping’ (published by Berrett-Koehler), Ed Schein argues that “what we think of as effective teamwork, collaboration and co-operation can all be understood best as consistent effective mutual helping”. For instance, he defines teamwork as “a state of multiple reciprocal helping relationships including all members of the group that have to work together. Building a team therefore is not just creating one client/helper relationship but simultaneously building one among all the members.” And he points out the many challenges involved in giving and receiving help. For instance, as receivers of help, we can often feel diminished or ‘one down’ when offered help; and, as givers of help, we have consciously to pause and turn away from what seems to be most pressing at the time in what are often very busy, hectic lives.



Principles of Helping

Three principles and tips stand out from Schein's advice to leaders keen to create an environment of mutual help and to demonstrate their own helping skills in their dealings with others in the organisation:

- Task interdependence is the essential foundation of strong mutual helping relationships. 'I helped Maia and Maia helped me' was the breathless comment of a three year old at the end of a very successful Easter egg hunt recently; she had formed a partnership with an equally ambitious egg hunting four year old to be clear winners in the task of finding (and consuming!) as many Easter eggs as possible. Similarly a VP of Sales and a VP of Operations in an IT Services company have formed a very strong 'helping' relationship around the challenging task of entering a new market. Schein argues that, without these mutually important tasks, it is very difficult to form strong 'helping' relationships. And he zeroes in on the importance of solicited, specific, descriptive and goal-related feedback, enabling colleagues to figure out how to become more helpful in the group's efforts to achieve its goals.
- The strongest helping relationships occur when both the giver and receiver of help are truly ready and when the relationship is equitable. For instance, he urges the giver of help to check whether the person she wants to help is ready and able to receive it; and the receiver of help to give regular feedback on what is and is not helpful, and particularly to be clear when help is no longer required.
- Effective helping needs to start with pure inquiry, strong effort to understand and empathise with the needs of the person requiring help. No matter how clear the request for help, he urges us to pause and reflect as the helper, truly to listen, and to challenge our own assumptions. And he argues that this is particularly important at the beginning of a helping relationship because it enhances the status of the person requiring help and maximises the information available to the helper.

2. Reciprocity; the Key to Influence

As with Schein, the notion of reciprocity is strongly highlighted in the work of Robert Cialdini who has researched the whole area of influence for 35 years across many sectors and walks of life, such an important ingredient of strong collaborative and co-operative relationships. He describes six 'weapons of influence' with 'reciprocity' at the top of the list. Here is the language and approach of the favour; if I do you a favour, you will do me a favour.

A Chief Operating Officer said to me last week that senior leadership relationships in his organisation were improving with an increased readiness to approach colleagues with the simple request, 'Please do me a favour'. He pointed out that it had not been easy to start to do this, because it had implied a declaration of vulnerability, but that the results were making it most worthwhile. And in business and public service, it is clear that Cialdini's notion of reciprocity plays out most powerfully through effective listening, 'If I listen to you, you are more likely to listen to me'. We are back to Schein's underlining of the importance of 'pure inquiry' as a critical component of strong, helping relationships.



3. Trust-based Culture

Leaders wishing to foster an environment where these notions of helping and influence and inquiry and reciprocity take root are striving to build a trust-based culture. When trust levels are high, both efficiency and effectiveness rise, as does understanding of what is important in an organisation in a rapidly changing environment. And when considering trust, we need look no further than the seminal work of Charlie Green (www.trustedadvisor.com), co-author of *Trusted Advisor* (2000) which is still ranked seventh in the list of top 25 business books eleven years after publication, author of *Trust-based Selling* (2005) and co-author of *The Trusted Advisor Fieldbook* to be published in November 2011.

Charlie argues that we are most interested in doing business and forming strong working relationships with those who truly care about us and our needs. At the core of his work is the notion that we can become more trustworthy in all our important relationships if we pay attention to raising our Reliability (our actions and deeds, delivering what we promise), our Credibility (our words, what we know and the passion with which we communicate it) and our Intimacy (our ability to establish safe relationships with people through our discretion and empathy); and lowering our Self-orientation (our focus, ensuring that it is much more on the interests and needs of the other, the person we are aiming to help, than our own). Herein lies a very powerful guiding framework for trust-based leadership and the development of trust-based relationships across and outside the organisation.

PLi Comment: *Our propensity as leaders can be to pay too much attention to the harder-edged elements of the organisation - its strategy, its structure and processes, and its goals and objectives cascaded down the organisation " critical though they are. The contributions of Schein, Cialdini and Green remind us that relationship behaviours, attitudes and skills play a pivotal role in supporting the development of more agile, lean organisations. As you continue to model these for your colleagues, the following five points might act as a useful guide for you:*

- *Encourage open feedback across your leadership team about the pursuit of the team's collective and individual goals.*
- *Adopt an even more inquiring approach with your colleagues, really listening in order to understand their needs for help, and challenging your own assumptions about what you think they need.*
- *Check in regularly on what help is needed and how this is changing.*
- *Invite help yourself, showing your own vulnerability as a result.*

Shape your leadership around the trust-building elements of High Reliability, Credibility and Intimacy and Low Self-orientation.

The older we get, the brainier we become, by Steve Turner

Oh no, not another 'senior moment' as we might lose our car keys or forget a customer's name or can't remember why we went upstairs for...hmmm...something. We jest about the ageing process and assume that the phenomenon of forgetfulness is a symptom of a general decline in cognitive functioning. There seems to be abundant evidence around us to confirm this assumption. Many of us need a 'young person' to install the new gizmo or operate their mobile phone and we are told that people over a certain age are too old to be effective performers. One might argue that there is explicit ageism in organisational selection processes.



This is the personal backdrop for leaders operating in challenging, fast moving, ambiguous worlds. It must be an additional struggle for us to thrive whilst fighting against the inevitable intellectual decline accompanying the ageing process.

But wait a minute, how true is this thinking? Well actually, it is seriously flawed. Take heart, leaders in middle age that might forget a few things, possess better brains for high performance in leading organisations. How is this? Simple really, we (middle aged people) know lots, we are less impulsive, we are better at making decisions and we are creative. Feeling better now? And there is an evidence base for these assertions:

- On a range of cognitive skills, the middle-aged brain (approx. 40-68 years) outperforms all other age groups. The middle-aged brain has developed “powerful systems that cut through the intricacies of complex problems to find concrete answers. It more calmly manages emotions and information. It is more nimble, more flexible, even cheerier” (Strauch 2011). Our ability to make accurate judgments about people, about jobs, about finances - about the world around us - grows stronger. Our brains build up patterns of connections, interwoven layers of knowledge that allow us to instantly recognise similarities of situations and see solutions.
- On four of the six key mental abilities, the peak comes in mid-life. It can size up situations better, draw the connections and see the wider context that enables us to exercise better judgement. It appreciates subtlety and ambivalence. In particular, we excel at inductive reasoning. In research on wisdom, one study concluded that it peaks at about 65 after a sustained accumulation through mid-life.

There’s also evidence that as a group we’re considerably smarter than any similarly aged groups that went before us. Indeed, even the long-held view that our brains lose millions of brain cells through the years has now been discounted. The research by Dr Cheryl Grady, a neuroscientist at the University of Toronto shows that older adults use their brains in a new way. We tap into the same brain circuits as younger adults, but we also recruit an additional region - the powerful frontal cortex, the front of the brain that is responsible for problem solving. We have two frontal cortexes, one on each side of the brain (known as hemispheres). Just a few years after Dr Grady’s discovery, another study found that while young people switched between sides, older adults used them both at once.

Also the middle-aged brain is more cheerful! As we age we develop not only coping strategies but also the ability to put difficulties into perspective and to make sense of the world that enables them to perform. In a range of tests, the middle aged were less stressed and anxious about negative stimuli and responded strongly to positive. We develop the ability to resist the siren calls of the amygdala that is geared to respond to negative, threatening stimuli with the consequence that we stay calm, remain emotionally stable and generate personal enthusiasm.

Middle age is a modern phenomenon because life expectancy has increased so quickly and it is appropriate that we review assumptions about our effectiveness especially in the world of leadership. It can be seen as a kind of crossroads with a growing appreciation of what's now called 'cognitive reserve', that some brains have, or can develop, an emergency stash of brainpower that, when the going gets rough enables us to be more resilient, to employ more efficient brain connections or repair systems that can be called up when necessary.



I have to stop writing this to go look for my car keys. Oh, and then I'll see a client and deliver some outstanding consultancy!

PLi Comment: *These research findings are timely. It shows that leaders within the middle age profile are very well placed to excel in providing the type of leadership we need in these times. For example an IBM survey, referenced in an earlier Inquirer, placed creativity at the top of the list of CEO challenges. We need to credit the creativity, judgement and wisdom of the middle-aged leader brain. There are many implications for leaders in possession of the middle-aged brain. In particular they should:*

- *Appreciate all such strengths as thinkers and recognise the contribution of these strengths to business success*
- *Boost self confidence in thinking skills and avoid self-limiting assumptions that constrain effectiveness and impact*
- *Exploit the ability to take a more positive perspective on the world to generate resilience in the workplace*

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.

