



Nugget 2: Primal Leadership

The last leadership nugget drew attention to evolutionary biology and primal instincts in the context of leader-follower relationships. Humans have a lot in common with chimpanzees. We are *group-living* mammals; we seek the company of others to charge our souls, provide support and social feedback. We protect our young. We are hierarchical and status seeking. Like chimps, we can be manipulative and capable of deception. The most influential and politically savvy sometimes get to lead – not always the most competent or strongest Alpha males. Leaders enjoy significant privileges which are implicitly recognised and accepted by followers so long as the followers receive their share of the value pie too. Otherwise followers will quickly replace or destroy their leader when the value proposition is perceived as being overly weighted in favour of the leader (the recent revolts in the Middle East are human examples).

Ambitious followers in the animal kingdom watch closely from the back of the group or herd to identify when the time is right to challenge the leader, and take charge. On the Savanna this involves a physical fight which is often preceded by garnering the esteem and support from other followers. In the worlds of business and politics this might involve putting out misinformation to damage the leader's reputation and undermine trust with the other followers and those above.

Once the challenger has taken over, the new leader chooses his/her team, sets the direction and the rules. He/she then selects a cohort of trusted companions that are encouraged to give a view and be involved in setting direction and allocating food and resources. The remaining followers are typically implementers - they follow instructions, do as they are told, and make things happen. In time, the cycle of ambitious follower challenging the leader repeats itself over and over.

New Leadership Paradigms

History reminds us that economic extremes (both growth and recession) can have significant unfavourable consequences. During these competitive periods some people are driven by greed or anxiety and fear, and often revert to being political animals; using their primal instincts to thrive or survive. 'Sibling rivalry' and 'transference' result in competitiveness, envy, misinformation and gossip, and bring out the shadow side of the normally much brighter side of human nature.

In the context of leadership, the world post-2008 is a very different one to that in which leaders grew up and led in their careers to-date. "In the past we had steady tail winds and relatively smooth seas. Now we have to tack into changeable head winds and have cross tides and many competitors to contend with."

Questions for Leaders

Evolutionary biology raises some questions for leaders to reflect on. Using Jim Collins 'Good to Great' metaphor:

- "Does the leader have the right people on the bus?"
- "Does the leader driving the bus need a mirror enabling him/her to watch what is going on down the back of the bus and spotting who are the informal leaders?"
- "How are contractors (working on projects inside large organisations) impacting on the attitudes and behaviours of staff and impacting on the organisation's culture?"

- "Does the organisation's culture need to be refreshed or realigned?"
- "Does the leader relying on one style of leadership (transformational or transactional) need to adapt his/her style to changing situations?"
- "How can the leader reduce anxiety and shift the focus of followers from inward to outward looking?"
- "How can leaders get a better balance between innovation and cost-cutting in order to create growth opportunities whilst keeping costs down?"
- "Does the leader's actions and communications pass the Four-Way Test: (i) Is it the truth? (ii) Is it fair to all concerned? (iii) Will it build goodwill and better relationships? and, (iv) Will it be beneficial to all concerned?"
- Most important of all, "How can leaders create a vision and imbed a set of values that lifts the hearts and minds of people to causes bigger than themselves, and, how can we be the best role models that we can be?"

Group Dynamics Provide the Clue

Without having definitive answers to the questions posed by this increasingly complex leadership environment, group dynamics might hold some clues. Most mums and dads will notice that their ten year olds are totally different one-on-one than when they are with a friend. And then totally different when at a sleep-over with a group of kids. Group dynamics have an impact on the best of people and leaders need to evaluate their followers' attitudes & behaviours and impact on their peers - not just their performance outcomes. As Peter Blake once said "When racing in the Whitbread around the world race, I would rather have a team of bronze medalists in my crew (who stay positive under difficult conditions) than a cohort of gold medallists who are competitive and single minded". We can also learn some leadership tricks from school teachers who know how important it is to spot the potential 'ring leaders' at the beginning of the year, get them onside and secure their support. In business, these may be the people whose behaviours don't always align with their rhetoric. The best tactic is to rope them in, give them something challenging to do – there is nothing more dangerous than a capable follower without a meaningful role.

Developing new Leadership Capabilities

Remember that 'to transform your organisation, first you must transform yourself'. And once you transform yourself, you must develop your leadership team and chart a course that moves your organisation from competitive inward looking, to creative and inspiring growth opportunities. ISL's leadership programmes focus on the bright side of leadership – providing leaders with diagnostics to identify mischievous chimps and build high trust / high performing teams.

If you would like to share your views on Primal Leadership, or previous ISL Nuggets, click on www.leadershipconversations.co.nz and join the ISL Leadership Conversations intranet.