Powerful leadership: the importance of self-awareness in extending range

Centre for Performance-led HR
Thought Leadership Series 2010-01

Judith Nicol and Paul Sparrow
Powerful leadership: the importance of self-awareness in extending range

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Judith Nicol and Paul Sparrow argue that whilst there is now an awareness amongst senior leaders about the desirability of incorporating emotional intelligence into their repertoire, this awareness is often a product of dysfunction. Senior leaders think about emotional intelligence as it applies to them as leaders in transactional terms, as a tool to call upon in certain situations. It is a compartmentalized concept rather than the driver of their emotional, thinking and behavioral responses. There is a possibility for executive coaching to counteract this, but inconsistent depth and quality of delivery plus an absence of HR intervention in setting up and evaluating the coaching contracts, means the opportunity is often squandered. There can be a price to pay for this, and this kind of leadership dynamic can lead top teams and senior leaders to develop illusions of control over their business models. For reflection and coaching to have long-term impact, there has to be some kind of underlying transformation. Leaders need to learn how to move smoothly between a range of opposing styles - an “inside out” approach to emotional intelligence. We lay out some of the risks associated with not developing this approach, and articulate what is involved in developing a more self aware, dual-gear, approach to leadership.
Is senior leadership coaching functional?

The word ‘reflection’ would have been difficult for CEOs and HR Directors to embrace or use a decade ago. But now there are few who would not acknowledge or talk about the need to reflect. Why is this? Do we have a new generation of leaders who think and behave differently? Is there a different gender balance amongst leaders that is leading to a shift in style? Or is it that CEOs now face such a high level of business uncertainty that they must acknowledge the need to reflect? Sadly, we fear that the reasons are not so positive – there are some hidden dangers in the apparent embracing of the need to reflect. There is a risk that reflection is only surface deep and does not lead to higher performance. In practice, senior leaders often run from one interaction to another – be it internal or external. Their diaries are full. So they notice the need for a more reflective routine – but this need is a product of dysfunction.

Certainly amongst senior leaders there is now an awareness about the desirability of incorporating emotional intelligence into their repertoire. This has been built up by external triggers, such as popular literature, media comment, leadership articles: the phrase “emotional intelligence” is well established within the corporate dictionary and appears in various guises on lists of desirable employee and leader behaviors. Many leaders, we fear, pay superficial attention to emotional intelligence? They think about emotional intelligence as it applies to them as leaders in transactional terms, almost as a tool to call upon in certain situations. It can become a catch all prerequisite for aspiring leaders.

This is reflected in and exacerbated by the inconsistent depth and quality of coaching available for senior leaders. What do we mean by this? Think for a moment about the “brand” of coaching available for CEO. Why might it reinforce “more of the same” in our leaders? At the middle management level, coaching interventions tend to be more structured and monitored for output by the HR function. But at senior levels, many leaders want to keep the HR Director away from their own coaching relationships, ostensibly for reasons of confidentiality. The higher up in an organization the coaching occurs, often the less HR intervention there is in setting up and reviewing its output. Leaders often rely on a brand of coaching that is more akin to a consigliere role – be that the counsel of a master strategist behind the scenes, or a slightly more passive sounding board and tactical advisor, or an inner mafia or selective few with whom the leader can share their current concerns – and this is only a partially successful strategy in developing high performance. Coaching at this level can amount to little more than senior leaders just
“talking” to people with similar experiences. There is no transformational element to the support that they get – there is no broadening of their leadership range. What they get is just better ‘tactics’. This carries risks for the organization.

In a broader sense, few CEOs will say that they are not good at taking on board others’ views – but of course in reality many are poor at unattached listening. And herein lies a problem – an absence of real listening means that there will in practice be a poor quality of what is called “strategy talk”. Strategy talk is the free-ranging analysis of the business model (we define a business model as the value chain or web of resources that requires choices by a company’s senior executives regarding its overall strategic direction or imperatives and the allocation and coordination of resources to achieve this) that is needed to ensure sound strategic execution.

The problem arises when emotional intelligence is used just as a transactional charm tactic - rather than it enabling powerful listening – it is used (often not knowingly) to satisfy other executives: but all the charm and “switched on” emotional intelligence is doing is providing a veneer of interest and acknowledgement. And there can be a price to pay. This kind of leadership dynamic can lead top teams and senior leaders to develop what is called an “illusion of control” over this business model. In the psychological literature there is no precise definition of overconfidence – but it tends to manifest itself in three ways. First, miscalibrations, where leaders assess outcomes as better than average when they are not. Second, illusions of control, a judgment bias where leaders overestimate the precision of the information available to them so misjudge their level of control, contingency options, and their ability to predict. Third, simply an unrealistic optimism. Coaching that merely shores up these tactics of getting your charming way – or leaders’ emotional intelligence as a skill that is the product of their charm - does not future-proof the organization.

Many CEOs go into strategic discussions with a firm view of what the outcomes will be. Many of the most telling issues in practice get discussed in advance in small groups in corridors, to line up the necessary allegiances and coalitions. So, in the Boardroom, there is not a genuine discussion. Some of the recent controversy about the depth of Cabinet discussion surrounding decisions about the Iraq war reminds of us this danger. What is it that senior leaders are frightened of in such circumstances? A loss of time to execute the strategy? The loss of control? Both are important considerations, but often such behaviors are also a by product of senior egos – senior leaders needing to manage the process.
We argue that in order for reflection and for coaching interventions to be effective, there has to be some kind of underlying transformation that moves leaders towards higher performance, otherwise it produces essentially “more of the same”. Leaders need to learn how to move smoothly between a range of opposing styles. This is called an “inside out” approach to emotional intelligence. It remains a challenge for many leaders, because it requires a discipline and commitment to practice self-awareness and choice-making that few understand the need for, and even fewer commit to.

**What is the problem?**

Few leaders exhibit real flexibility and free choice in their selection of leadership approach in any given situation. The decision tends to be as a result of a reflex response, or behavior patterns established over a long period of time. Most leaders will have a natural propensity for either a Hard Power or Soft Power approach. Although some leaders may intellectually recognize the difference between Hard and Soft Power approaches, few have the self-awareness to be at the best position of choice between the two continuums.

As long as overall personal and business performance is good, there can remain a culture amongst senior leaders that their leadership styles are “fit for purpose”, which discourages change and any real broadening of leadership range. They are more likely to see emotional intelligence as a key response within a Soft Power style, rather than as an awareness that allows them to be at choice between the two opposite sides of the model. Leaders tend to mentally ring fence emotional intelligence as a concept that is useful when they are involved - in a narrow sense of the word - in people issues.

Traditional psychometric assessment and behavioral models contribute to this “one gear” approach: it may be true and valid but it is linear. Because it has credibility in organizations and amongst leaders, it can provide seemingly legitimate labels behind which it is possible to hide, thereby denying them the possibility of extending leadership range.
Figure 1: Athene Integrated Power Model™

Athene Integrated Power Model™

LEADERSHIP RANGE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOFT POWER</th>
<th>HARD POWER</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intuition</td>
<td>Intellect</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflective</td>
<td>Decisive</td>
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<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>Profit</td>
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<td>Ambiguity</td>
<td>Clarity</td>
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<td>Generative</td>
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<td>Wisdom</td>
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<td>Others</td>
<td>Self</td>
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<td>Listens</td>
<td>Talks</td>
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<td>Value Adding</td>
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<td>Humility</td>
<td>Self Confidence</td>
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<td>Enables</td>
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<td>Vulnerability</td>
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<td>Supportive</td>
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<td>Coaches</td>
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<td>Collaborative</td>
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<td>Conversations</td>
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<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>Uncompromising</td>
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<td>Possibilities</td>
<td>Actions</td>
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SELF AWARENESS

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Generally in organizations, more senior leaders will have reflex responses or behavioral patterns which are typically associated with the Hard Power rather than the Soft Power end of the model shown in Figure 1. Through generations of leaders, this predisposition repeats itself, as high potential individuals observe what seems to propel leaders into more senior roles.

Whilst some of the characteristics typically associated with Soft Power, for example, humility and putting others before yourself, are regarded as “nice to have”, rarely are they regarded as an essential tool to have available in the kitbag at all times. It is useful to be able to demonstrate them in order to appear human in a managed way, but they will generally be thought of as not as useful as self-confidence and looking after oneself. Rather than seeing both as equally valid styles, and being at choice between the two, the reflex is on the Hard Power side.

There is also a tendency for women in senior roles to become more limited in their leadership range after they observe what makes their senior (typically male) counterparts successful. They frequently abandon skills in a nurturing collaborative Soft Power style for a more action oriented Hard Power approach, thus becoming more limited role models for younger females.

Whilst it is often desirable for any leader with reflexes on the Soft Power end of the model to broaden their range to incorporate possible Hard Power responses, frequently they overcompensate and exchange one set of reflexes for another without any broadening of their self awareness or broadening of their leadership range. This can actually act as a disincentive for younger talent who assess that this is the only way they too will be successful but feel inherently uncomfortable about making this choice.

The risk is that you can become a parody of yourself. Functional stereotypes start to drive the legitimate spaces you can go into, rather than innate ability.

There remain few senior women in substantial line roles. The majority are to be found in functional roles: HR; marketing; PR. Perhaps women who do not want to respond in a predominantly Hard Power fashion see these roles as the ones that allow them to operate more according to their natural predispositions.

Male leaders typically have a predisposition for action and for getting from A to B in as seemingly direct fashion as possible. Within this overarching framework, they try to adopt what they perceive to be emotionally intelligent behaviors but the two aspects are often not integrated and this can cause them to appear unauthentic.
Showing emotional intelligence appears to be a conscious effort and male leaders are most likely to think about this as a response to a member of the team having a personal issue or exhibiting what they consider to be negative emotion such as anger or distress.

Sometimes they revert to responses typically linked with Soft Power more as a result of recognizing their own dysfunctionality. Their decisiveness has taken them into a cul de sac of exhaustion and complexity and so reflection seems to be the way out of it. Or they are tired trying to think their way out of a problem and so turn to their intuition as a last resort. Or they have become frustrated trying to convince someone of their point of view to no avail and eventually listen instead.

**What can be done? Why learning how to switch gears produces high performance leadership**

A key capability that is often talked about by academics studying the nature of strategic thought is what is called “dual gearing”. The phrase "switching cognitive gears" has been used to draw attention to the fact that cognitive functioning – and by analogy effective strategic thought - involves the capacity to shift between two modes of thinking – from an automatic, intuitive and subconscious type of processing to a more analytical and conscious type of engagement. Effectiveness may be as much a function of a leader’s capacity to sense when to switch as well as being able to process in one or another mode.

So if we follow the analogy about habits of thought, and apply it to the realm of leadership styles, then a similar dual gearing capability becomes important. Having the awareness to be at choice between opposite responses is a positive thing for talent development. Moreover, increasing diversity and having more inclusive organizational cultures also becomes important for good business practice and governance. But few leaders currently have the capability to exhibit it consistently.

Returning to Figure 1, in reality, effective leaders might want to “turn the volume up” on one side of each equation, but we argue that this is not an either-or contingency. It has to be part of a very disciplined skill. Operating in the middle ground is very hard – so the key for most leaders is deciding where they want to be (down one side of the equation), but understanding how to help keep the (opposite) style in operation, by keeping its supporting antennae alive. It is only by keeping the compensation mechanisms open that they can make themselves more effective. Using the left hand in a right-handed situation is the skill – knowing this is different to knowing how you would use your left hand by itself.
Combining opposites and being at choice between them produces more rounded leaders capable of getting the best out of everyone else and also in so doing improves corporate governance. Governance is not just about process but how leaders behave around the process.

One of the ways to overcome these tendencies is to engage people with the impact of their typical reflex responses on others, through very specific 360 degree feedback, gained through a loose dialogue with the individuals who surround and interact with them. Through this they start to understand the value for themselves and for others in extending their leadership range. It also demonstrates and reinforces the need for a more sophisticated self-awareness that goes beyond “labels” as the starting point for any transformational change in leadership range.

Let’s return to the problem of “strategy talk” that we raised earlier, and the dangers of senior leaders having an “illusion of control” over the business model. Whilst many senior leaders would say that they enter discussions with a view to listening as well as explaining, it is also true that they listen with a view to persuading the person round to their perspective. Because of this there is a real question mark as to whether the outcome always best serves the whole organization and its shareholders.

Frequently the real discussions take place outside of Board meetings but with a view to aligning people to certain perspectives and working out what is likely to get broad support in order to take decisions and implement action. So real conversations amongst individuals being at choice between explaining their point of view and attentive unattached listening rarely takes place in the most senior boardrooms.

Leaders feel the need to be strong, to take control and to take action. And yet if they can combine and truly be at choice between this and showing vulnerability, empowering others and mulling over possibilities, this will build trust amongst their teams and the rest of the organization. It will feel balanced, considered yet with a strong sense of forward momentum. It will feel safer for people to follow and give their commitment.

Many women have predispositions for behaviors and thinking more typically associated with Soft Power. However in order for them to progress up organizational hierarchies to the most senior level, it is a prerequisite that they can dual gear around certain aspects of the model (See Figure 1). In particular, focusing attention on themselves (in addition to the needs of others) is essential in self-promotion to internal and external networks. An uncompromising approach to their career is needed if women are to progress, and must be played out alongside the more typical accommodating and flexible view of the world that often characterizes them. Similarly
they need to express self confidence if anyone is to take them seriously at senior leadership level and must learn to keep in check or not over play their humility.

**Finding the keys and motivation to unlock the ability to dual gear?**

Asked another way, where senior leaders are producing great results in a way that keeps non executive Directors and other corporate safe guarders happy, they might ask “for the sake of what, should I change?”

Most leaders, however successful, have an “imposter syndrome”, and that fear of “being found out” is probably the vulnerability, a powerful aspect of Soft Power which will make them curious as to how they can maximize the chances of continuing success (the ultimate expression of Hard Power). Most leaders are besieged with inner questions that they will only rarely share with their closest confidant or coach: “can I reproduce this success year on year? What if the market fundamentally changes? What if I lose some of my key people? What if my current formula stops working?”

Coaching feedback may just give people a language to self-describe – it gives them a defense mechanism only. Again, it is “for the sake of what” question. If you just have personal information and self-description for the sake of it, that is not enough. So, the skill is pulling this data together, and asking is there any way in which this limits me? And if it limits me, will it limit people around me? And if it limits them, what is the intelligence I am really missing out on?

The key then, is for leaders and their coaches to spot the need for when they need to loosen up. There is an external and an internal assessment to this. They might realize that the time is now right to change gears perhaps because of a shift in the current politics, or on the basis of an assessment of the current level of organizational capability. Or they might have picked up that their trusted agents are uncomfortable with the current dialogue and need some voice (they pick up on the interpersonal sensitivities). But these are all external triggers – the ability to sense when to switch gears is also based on an internal assessment. There also has to be an internal awareness, often a bodily reaction to uncompromising behavior. This is when an assessment of the need to flex style based on an underlying emotional intelligence might give them points of entry to other discussions.

Really good 360 degree feedback and other interventions of a non linear nature, including coaching, can also start to open their eyes to the limitations of a one gear approach and to the realization that the lack of a dual gear approach may produce the outcome they least want: a
lack of further success. Where this intervention is done in a compassionate yet direct manner, it role models the power of an integrated approach to leadership.

Conclusion

Having the self-awareness to be at choice between opposite responses is a real discipline that requires practice. Leaders have to be prepared to take some risks as they learn to broaden their range. Naturally they may still have a predisposition for one side of the model or the other, but this doesn’t mean they can’t act in a dual geared way. The trick, even when they have decided to respond using one approach rather than the other is to be able to keep the opposite supporting antennae alive so that you remain at choice throughout.

Where leaders achieve this, they will be powerful leaders but will also have great followership in their organizations; their organizations will develop a culture which mirrors the best of a Hard and Soft Power approach.

About the Authors

Judith Nicol is Director of Athene Leadership Coaching.

Paul Sparrow is Director of the Centre for Performance-led HR.

How to quote or cite this document


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For further information, please contact:
Centre Administrator
Email: CPHR@lancaster.ac.uk
Telephone: +44 (0)1524 592175

Centre for Performance-led HR
Lancaster University Management School
Bailrigg
Lancaster
LA1 4YX
United Kingdom

www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/cphr