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## Equipping Leaders in Complex Times

THIS BOOK HAS EXAMINED A VARIETY OF BLIND SPOTS, demonstrating how they permeate our decisions and actions. The construction of our living knowledge emerges from the interplay between prior learning, interpretation of personal experience and subconscious blind spots. These blind spots influence our attention, emotions, sensemaking and behaviour, infusing everything we think we know and understand. They are manifested in what we listen to and what we ignore, in what we do and what we avoid doing, in the people we like and those we dismiss. They are constantly active, steering us away from elements of reality we would rather not see.

Our blind spots are many and varied. Some are cognitive biases (a preference for certain kinds of knowledge over others). Some are emotional aversions – to people, to certain emotions (such as guilt) or to facing aspects of ourselves that we have not yet come to terms with. Some are behavioural blind spots – for example, where we say one thing but do another. The blind spots we have covered in this book include the following:

- *Visionary blind spots* – the tendency towards intolerance, rigidity and rejection of complexity that may characterize the visionary leader; a similar intolerance may be seen in people who have goals they are strongly committed to.
- *Self awareness blind spots* – refusing to face aspects of yourself that are negatively affecting your behaviour, emotional health and/or your relationships.

- *Complacency blind spots* – acting to meet your personal goals and desires rather than actively pursuing the interests of the stakeholders you represent.
- *Ethical blind spots* – not acting in accordance with your idealistic values.
- *Complexity blind spots* – refusing to develop your cognitive complexity by absorbing new and/or different paradigms, beliefs or constructs.
- *Emotional blind spots* – refusing to learn how to handle your emotions effectively – e.g. refusing to confront emotional prejudices, succumbing to hot cognition (excessive emotion) and cold cognition (repressing emotion), and continually avoiding negative emotions.
- *Values blind spots* – refusing to recognize the legitimacy of other people’s motivational values and rejecting non-preferred values in all situations and circumstances.
- *Attention blind spots* – being overly focused or too broad in one’s attention patterns.
- *Behavioural blind spots* – a resistance to changing one’s behaviour, leading to the continual implementation of ineffective strategies.

Looking at these blind spots, we can see that they are ubiquitous. In fact, it may appear naïve to suggest that we could ever rid ourselves of them; they are part of what it is to be human. Blind spots affect how we make sense of reality; they modulate our emotional responses to events and, in so doing, shape our identity and culture.

This can lead to a sense of hopelessness. How can we hope to master something so subtle and so pervasive? The Max Planck quote we saw in Chapter 1 voices that sense of despair that we experience when contemplating the need for *other* people to overcome *their* blind spots and change *their* mind-sets:

*‘A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents, but rather because its opponents die and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it’.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Planck, M. (1936) *Philosophy of Physics*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc.

There is a sense that all we can do in the face of these deeply engrained psychological processes is to shrug our shoulders and observe with bemusement whilst they are played out in history time and time again. Maybe this is the reason that we can never learn from history; we are condemned to learn only from our personal experience. As a result, we seem destined to repeat previous generations' mistakes over and over again.

It does not have to be this way. It *is* possible to confront and overcome our blind spots and to achieve a depth and breadth of learning more than capable of embracing the complexities of our age. The research on which this book is based consistently reveals remarkable examples of creative and productive learning and change. The real challenge lies in incorporating this into our daily practice – to become *super learners*.

The belief underpinning this book is that it is the *duty* of people in leadership positions to attempt to overcome their blind spots. Blind spots contribute towards inferior decision making, and a leader's flawed decisions can lead to detrimental consequences for many people. Leaders are constantly making decisions; some are 'big', like the decision to invade Iraq; others are small, like the decision to cancel a meeting. But every decision a leader makes helps to enact the future. It is, therefore, incumbent on leaders to ensure their decisions are as free as they can be from blind spots.

The effectiveness of decision making rests upon the accumulated living knowledge of the decision maker, which, in turn, depends upon his ability to learn – both from his own actions and those of others. These qualities are further dependent on both the ability to forge relationships and the development of personal 'character'. We have seen that relationships are the main sources of learning, as, through dialogue, they contribute towards the increasing complexity of living knowledge. Character is important, as we have also seen that the ability to learn requires the discipline to control natural desires and restrain instinctive human responses.

In order to lead effectively, therefore, a leader has to develop her *living knowledge*, her *relationships*, her *character* and her *ability to learn*. If a leader's living knowledge (cognitive, emotional and behavioural) fails to reflect the complexity of the world in which it is applied, it

will generate poor and possibly harmful decisions. If the leader has stunted, unbalanced or poor relationships, decisions will be impoverished and cold. If the leader's character is flawed and subject to uncontrolled pride, greed, impatience or anger, decisions will be weak and misguided. If the leader cannot learn, her decisions will reflect a rigid and intolerant mind that sees only what it wants to see.

The aim of this book has been first to focus the attention of leaders, and those who advise and develop them, on a simple set of practices and disciplines which will help to accelerate and deepen leaders' learning. It has also attempted to provide some ideas and start a dialogue within the learning profession regarding the most effective techniques and approaches for doing this (the last chapter provides initial ideas for tools and interventions). We recognize that this is only a beginning, but our hope is that by incorporating this approach into leadership development and supporting it with a new ingenuity of method, we will be able to expand the learning capacity of leaders. In fact, we believe that the 21st century will demand nothing less.

We cannot afford to have leaders at the helm of our organizations and societies whose decisions reflect weaknesses in living knowledge, character, relationships and learning. Political leaders even now are making decisions that could lead to global conflict. Their decisions about the environment could have devastating consequences in decades to come. Business leaders make decisions daily within complex social, political, technological and economic systems. The complexity handled by our leaders and the speed at which they have to act will continue to increase exponentially. This is multifaceted. In addition to technological and commercial complexity, research has shown that 'social complexity' has increased rapidly, and will continue to do so as leaders have to implement policies through large, multicultural, multifunctional teams that are dispersed geographically throughout the world.<sup>2</sup> The stakes are high, and although many leaders are coping with these challenges, we need leaders who can handle them positively – with the wisdom, honesty and determination that will help to enact a future that we all aspire to.

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<sup>2</sup> Jones, P. and Holton, V. (2006) 'Teams Today.' *The Ashridge Journal*, Spring.

So, how can we all contribute towards the task of encouraging our future leaders to develop these skills? The eight practices and the underlying learning theory presented here are all designed to offer a framework that can help better equip leaders to handle the challenges of the 21st century. Whilst there may be nothing new about this approach to learning, what it does offer is a more integrated approach, bringing together traditions that have, in the past, generated separate and even competing communities. This integration offers a more complex approach to learning and development and is more suited to the more complex world in which we live. In addition, the focus on blind spots emphasizes the importance of humility with regards to our living knowledge, whilst recognizing that this humility must not be allowed to undermine the confidence to act. It offers a basis for the development of the skill of *learning agility*, perhaps the key to surviving in today's challenging environments.

So, what would a leader be doing differently if she were implementing these eight learning practices on the job? Let's see what this might look like.

## Effective Leadership in the 21st Century

An effective leader in the 21st century will appreciate that his own understanding of a situation is limited, subject to blind spots and in constant need of updating. He will seek out a range of views and opinions, always striving to build more comprehensive and subtle views of reality. He will be able to handle diversity, recognizing the different truths contained in different parts of the system. He will be known for his power to listen to, absorb and reconcile conflicting and contradictory views. A learning leader will go into a new situation and not assume that he knows how to handle it. He will talk to people and readily experiment with different constructs in order to build up a better guide to what will work in the new circumstances. He will be keen to check his beliefs against reality by putting in place a number of different feedback systems.

The 21st century leader will prioritize learning – taking regular retreats either alone or with her team. She will ensure that her people have regular personal and team retreats in order to hone their

judgement, deepen their insights and encourage greater creativity, challenge and vision in the organization.

A learning leader will face difficult aspects of himself in order to avoid being controlled by unconscious fears and anxieties. He will understand his own defensive patterns and be able to manage them. As a result, he will be seen as an honest, open individual willing to listen to bad news as well as good.

A learning leader will be able to learn from her emotions – surfacing them and exploring their meaning. She will also be willing to change her mind about people, accepting that she might have developed unjustified prejudices. She will be able to live by her own values but, at the right times, she will be receptive to alternative values and preferences.

She will regularly monitor what she is paying attention to, ensuring she is focused on key priorities but also being open to new and emerging developments and trends.

A learning leader will be prepared to make decisions that are not necessarily in his personal interests. He will be acutely aware of his responsibilities to all the stakeholders in his leadership. A learning leader might have a spiritual director to help develop his moral compass and personal discipline.

He will be able to change his own behaviour and develop his leadership style in tune with the changes in the environment. He will encourage innovation through creativity, experiments and skilled risk management.

It is likely that a learning leader will have a coach or mentor in order to help her on her learning journey. The learning leader will be able to enhance a group's ability to learn by accessing the latest tools and techniques for both individual and group learning. She will be familiar with tools for systems thinking, dialogue, positive psychology, creativity and innovation, reality checking, etc.

The 21st century leader will understand the nature of power – both how it enables and how it corrupts. He will be able to monitor its effect and manage himself to ensure he employs it for the good of

his stakeholders. He will have the wisdom and moral courage to resist its temptations and distortions.

This may sound too good to be true. But this picture of the learning leader represents an ideal to which we need to aspire – even if this is a lifelong task. There is a growing recognition that, in the context of rapid change and growing uncertainty, what worked even three years ago, will not necessarily work in the present. Leaders have to learn and change continuously if they are to keep up. In highly complex environments, it is unlikely that the leader will know the answers; indeed, it is highly unlikely that *anyone* will know the answers. All we can do is to learn to listen to different perspectives from within the system and develop a growing, evolving understanding of the situation in which we find ourselves. This will entail patience, tolerance, courage, discernment, self discipline and many of those qualities commonly associated with ‘character’ or wisdom. Leaders will increasingly need to access appropriately what Zen Buddhism refers to as the *beginner’s mind*. This is a quality of mind that is highly receptive to learning – open, attentive, eager and willing to suspend judgement and prejudice. The Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki has a famous saying: ‘in the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities; in the expert’s mind there are few’. The challenge facing leaders in the 21st century is how to combine and utilize both their expert *and* their beginner’s minds.

Having looked at the implications of this framework for leaders, what are the implications for those whose job it is to develop current and future leaders?

## Implications for Leadership Development

The implications of this framework for those in leadership development are both personal, relating to how we manage our own learning, and content-based, relating to how we approach and what we include in the leadership development agenda.

### Personal Challenges

The most obvious challenge is that we, too, have our blind spots! Many of us are wedded to traditions, tools and techniques that in

some way suit us rather than our clients. If we have grown up using an approach based on Gestalt, we tend to regard this as ‘true’ and ‘right’. If we feel more comfortable with a cognitive approach, we tend to see this as ‘true’ and ‘right’. The trouble is that we bring our own blind spots into the learning environment, and this can itself inhibit the learning of our clients. If we are expecting busy executives to identify and address their blind spots, we have to lead the way and address our own. This does imply that ongoing supervision is extremely important, especially for coaches. It also stresses the need for ongoing professional development. The learning model presented here suggests that we may need to broaden our approach and take on board a variety of traditions – cognitive, emotional and behavioural.

We need to pass on our understanding of learning theory, so that we encourage our managers and leaders to develop their own meta-learning skills. We need to be more open about the difficulties and pain involved in learning, in particular the links between learning, identity, personal needs and self esteem. It is useful to understand the different learning states, appreciating the different kinds of learning that take place on and off the job. This also implies that we need to be more open about the techniques we are using and why and how they are relevant. We need to be alert not just to facilitating leaders’ learning, but also to facilitating their meta-learning skills.

One of the biggest problems facing coaches is knowing how and when, and even if, to challenge a client’s living knowledge. Many leaders taking advantage of coaching today are highly successful and skilled. In many cases they have a well-articulated view of the world, which the coach will be invited to share. Yet, we have also seen that this view of the world may be biased and self-serving. A leader’s world view, having been previously very successful, may be quickly outdated. However, because of delayed feedback, the consequences may not yet have manifested themselves. Successful leaders may want coaches to bounce ideas off, to listen, support and reassure them in tough times. They may not want or welcome challenge. A critical challenge for the coach is how to identify when a leader’s view of the world is significantly out of kilter with those around him. The coach is continually invited to collude with the client’s view of reality – and may unintentionally prop up a view of the world that is causing harm and damage to others. Coaches need to understand

more about these dynamics. In particular, we need to explore how to get beyond the living knowledge of the learner without simply resorting to our own constructs of reality. This has to involve constant reality checking and an ongoing dialogue with other stakeholders in the system.

### Content Issues

When running leadership development programmes, we could afford to spend more time focusing on the nature of knowledge and truth. We need to encourage leaders to hold their knowledge more lightly. One question facing leaders today is how and when to develop their ‘beginner’s mind’, or how to develop the Keatsian notion of ‘negative capability’. This is the ability to act whilst accepting uncertainty and avoiding the temptation to reach for premature closure. Developing a beginner’s mind or honing one’s negative capability are complex skills for leaders to develop, as they must not undermine confidence or action. There is a lot of work that needs to be done in this area.

We need to explore the dynamics of decision making more deeply, particularly in terms of how our decisions reveal our own preferences and blind spots. These dynamics are best explored in the context of meaningful action, hence the increasing emphasis on real life challenges (both on and off the job) as crucibles for learning and leadership development. In addition, we could do a lot more to further leaders’ understanding of decision-making styles, cognitive biases, group defence mechanisms, hot and cold cognition and the effects of power on decision making.

We need to understand more about the role of attention. Brain science is increasingly alerting us to the problems associated with our biased attention patterns and consequent blind spots. In a recent article on ‘attention’ for *Scientific American Mind*, Engel, Debener and Kranczioch summarize their research findings thus: ‘The healthy brain is . . . anything but a passive receiver of news from the environment. It is an active system, one that controls itself via a complex internal dynamic. Our experiences, intentions, expectations and needs affect this dynamic and thus determine how we perceive and

interpret our environment'.<sup>3</sup> Leaders making decisions need at least to understand more about this dynamic.

We need to focus on developing 'character'. This means a number of things. First, we need to reintroduce the ideas of the 'disciplines' back into leadership training. Whilst it is important to focus on authenticity in leadership, it is also important to recognize the need for self development and self restraint. Power magnifies character. Hence, an impatient individual, when in power, becomes reckless; an intolerant individual can become a bully. A complacent individual can, if appointed leader, lead an organization to its downfall. There are certain qualities that are necessary for effective leadership, and we discover those qualities in the whole notion of 'character'. Second, we need to understand more about the nature of 'integrity' – what it is and how to develop it. There is much we can learn here from the spiritual and monastic traditions of many of the world's religions.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the humanist approach, that believes mankind is characterized by innate goodness combined with a constant desire for learning, the spiritual tradition openly acknowledges and seeks to train those aspects of human nature that we rarely like to admit to.

We also need to teach about and focus more explicitly on 'defensiveness' – both at an individual and a group level. Defensiveness is probably one of the commonest reasons for organizational under-performance, particularly as it is manifested in groups; it is widespread, corrosive and incredibly difficult to eradicate. All of us need to understand more about our own defensive reactions, how to manage them and how to manage those of others. In particular, managers and leaders need to develop the confidence to confront defensive behaviour that is undermining the values and ethos of the organization. After so many years of management development influenced by 1960s style humanism, many people in senior positions are afraid of adopting a 'directive' leadership style. We need to emphasize the validity of using the full range of leadership styles,

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<sup>3</sup> Engel, A. K., Debener, S. and Kranczioch, C. (2006) 'Coming to Attention'. *Scientific American Mind*, August/September, p. 46.

<sup>4</sup> See Zohar, D. and Marshall, I. (2001) *Spiritual Intelligence, The Ultimate Intelligence*. London: Bloomsbury. Dermot Tredget, a Benedictine monk based at Douai Abbey in Berkshire, also runs retreats and workshops on this subject.

including the directive style, and help leaders develop the judgement, confidence and skill to employ them. Defensiveness has to be managed.

We need to pay more attention to the quality of learning ‘space’ we create for leaders. The processes described in this book require a ‘deeper learning’. This involves the periodic use of individual and group retreats to help people assess and reconstruct the patterns of sensemaking that contribute towards their living knowledge. This is a sensitive and complex process, and requires a special type of environment.

Another complex skill is making sense in a group. As leaders increasingly lead through virtual groups or teams, we need to understand more about how best to make sense and reach meaningful consensus in this environment. Skills such as dialogue and listening (understanding the four different levels of listening from downloading and debating to reflective and generative listening) will be vital elements in a leader’s toolkit. There are many other tools available for making sense – from skills-based tools such as dialogue, to processes such as scenario learning, to IT tools such as systems mapping. When dealing with the levels of social complexity facing them today, leaders need access to an array of sensemaking tools and skills.

Effective leaders in the 21st century will be disciplined learners and will be found in a variety of positions and roles. These people will realize that powerful learning is not something that occurs naturally and effortlessly, but relies on discipline, self awareness, openness to challenge and a determination to listen – really listen – to diverse views and opinions. They will be aware of their natural blind spots and will have a range of strategies to overcome them. As a result, they will be in a better position to match the environmental complexity with their own emotional, behavioural and cognitive complexity. They will be highly effective decision makers, able to absorb, analyse and critically handle large amounts of data. Our best leaders will be super learners with a finely honed ability to learn from experience.

The challenge that currently faces us, is how to develop the ability to learn from experience, so that we can accelerate the pace and the depth of learning in both ourselves and in others. There is a massive agenda here for the profession, and we are keen to engage with

people interested in addressing this. At Cass Business School, as part of the Centre for Leadership, Learning and Change, we are seeking to establish a community of practice interested in further research in this area. At Waverley Learning, we are exploring new methods and interventions, specifically in the area of leadership retreats, 'deeper learning' and organizational learning.

The last chapter offers some ideas and exercises based on the eight learning disciplines. However, it is recognized that the task of accelerating learning is huge and ongoing. It is hoped that many more people will contribute new and innovative ideas that will help everyone, in a range of both formal and informal leadership positions, to accelerate their learning.