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What Leadership Means to Me

When I first started coaching I would coach leaders on critical and strategic thinking, communication and self-care, mostly relying on my academic background in psychology and philosophy, my own experience as a leader in organizations, and my coach training. I was familiar with a number of leadership theories, but none of them were evidence-based enough for me to be able to say with confidence to clients, 'This is what we're working on and here's why.'

That all changed when I became certified in a 360 assessment tool called the Leadership Circle Profile.

What I love about this assessment is that it's premised on the same psychological and philosophical theories I was using before I discovered the tool, but in addition contains a statistically validated theory of leadership that enables clients to know exactly what to aim for if they want to significantly improve their leadership effectiveness.

That's not to say that getting to a clear focus for any particular client is easy – there's a lot of very natural resistance that needs to be overcome – but we consistently get there in the end using this tool.

Here's how it works.

Like any 360 tool, the leader identifies people in their network that they would like to receive feedback from. Elected assessors are then divided into categories of Boss's Boss, Boss, Peers, Direct Reports and Other, with a link to a battery of questions sent to each assessor. Leaders also assess themselves, using the same battery of questions.

The data generated from this process is then normed against a database of everyone who has ever taken the assessment, delivering benchmarked data on 29 dimensions, 11 of which are negatively correlated with leadership effectiveness, and 18 of which are positively correlated. We know which dimensions positively correlate with leadership effectiveness because included in the battery of questions are questions that directly assess leadership effectiveness - questions like 'He/she is an example of an ideal leader,' and 'His/her leadership helps this organization to thrive.'

Leaders thus receive data on how effective they are perceived to be in their leadership role, with an authority that is hard to dispute. That's not to say leaders don't try to dispute the data. They do and they should. It is natural that leaders experience SARA - Shock, Anger, Resentment and Acceptance, in that order - and no coincidence that these overlap with Kubler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief. In a very real sense, leaders need to grieve the identity they are being asked to forego in favour of an emerging identity that is scarily unfamiliar.

Once the feedback has been accepted for what it is (and it is, after all, only perceptions, no matter how valid those perceptions may be), leaders choose how they want to respond to the feedback. Ideally, they focus on One Big Thing, a behavioural change that promises significant long-term benefits to them and the people they lead. The greater the perceived payoff to the leader of this behavioural change, the greater the likelihood they will undertake the often quite difficult psychological work to make it happen.

That psychological work involves developing a whole new layer of consciousness, such that what previously constituted the entirety of one's experience is now held within a larger frame, leading to a broader view and a greater capacity for productive detachment. This in turn often leads to a fundamental shift in

leadership, from a 'reactive' to a 'creative' style. Although these words have popular connotations, they are used here in a technical sense, with the former denoting a leadership style that is fear-based and avoidance-motivated, and the latter a leadership style that is vision-based and engagement-motivated.

I have had the opportunity to debrief this assessment with coaches, consultants, entrepreneurs, small business owners, private sector leaders, government leaders, and military leaders, in the US and Canada. While it is better suited to leaders working in larger organizations, the statistically validated theory of leadership and the psychological theory of transformational change on which it relies are useful no matter what kind of leader you are.

If:

- You routinely 'cover your ass' at work and avoid taking on new responsibilities;
- You have a sneaking suspicion that you could be a better leader, even if you're not exactly sure how; or
- You believe most leadership theories are compromised by halo effects and other biases and are looking for a more evidence-based approach

then check out The Leadership Circle and their awesome assessments. You can read the book *Mastering Leadership* by the creators of the tool to learn more, or visit their website at leadershipcircle.com.