What Matters Most for Leadership and Organizational Development

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W e applaud the dramatic influence that the NTL Institute for Applied Behavior Science has had on the field of leadership. NTL workshops have provided a rich toolkit of material and skills about personal awareness and about inner learning, including the following:

- understanding how behavior has unintended impacts;
- learning to express feelings and taking ownership for them;
- seeking and giving effective feedback;
- discovering how to dialogue with colleagues to know them as human beings; and
- recognizing the flow of group process as well as the what.

We speak from personal experience. In February 1999, one of us participated in an NTL Human Interaction Lab. It changed her life. She learned that the true price of admission to any group or organization is emotional commitment. This commitment includes an ability and a willingness to understand one’s needs, conflicts, and strategies for presenting oneself to others, combined with the ability and the willingness to share that self. In June 1999, she returned for a second workshop, the Tavistock Double Task Working Conference led by Harold Bridger, a contemporary of Kurt Lewin. And since then, she has yearned for more.

This kind of clinical training in human interaction is priceless for personal growth. It profoundly changes the individual and his or her behavior. Yet although the NTL approach can transform individuals, the individuals’ organizations and life contexts—their structure, pressures to perform, politics, and so forth—remain unchanged. Reentry from an NTL workshop is profoundly challenging, even into an organization in which some members celebrate NTL ideas. The result is that the individual returns to a system that may not sustain this kind of inner reflection and constructive human interaction at the group level. Without an organizational design that will nurture the sufficient “awareness and resolution of the internal patterns blocking the adoption of characteristics required for new or rapidly changing situations” (Hanna & Glassman, this issue), we wonder whether a one-time workshop will have the gunpowder to initiate current change and mushroom desired organizational transformation.

The Self-Awareness and Being (SAB) program that Hanna and Glassman describe provides an altered vision for NTL based on some level of dissatisfaction with the constraints embedded within the traditional NTL workshop. The SAB program is an important step in helping individuals to not only change themselves, as do the original NTL workshops, but also to assist them to become effective change agents. The addition of an influence model that brings together situational, organizational, and individual factors that create constraints on individual action is critical to helping individuals overcome personal blocks that may reduce their influence effectiveness.
Yet although an important step in the right direction, the influence of the SAB program is still constrained by the fact that the individual returns to the original system that they left. The Leader as Change Agent program takes leadership development to the next level; it brings leaders together from the same organization to collectively change the system. With this kind of program, individuals do not return to the original system they left because their coworkers have changed too. Now there are supportive coalitions and collective action plans for system-wide transformation.

The question remains, however, whether organizations are equipped to make the necessary investments for such change and what the costs are if they do not. There are financial investments in designing a custom program to meet a company’s specific needs. There are time investments of having executives and other employees away from their normal work responsibilities to participate in these programs. There are also personal investments of allowing oneself to become vulnerable and to break free of comfort zones on the road to enhanced self-awareness. These programs require people to look inside themselves and to develop greater personal awareness. It is often disconcerting to look inside because people might not like what they see. Some people resist the kind of change that is the heart of these kinds of programs.

The investments are high, but the costs may be higher. Leaders who fail to make these kinds of personal and organizational investments may be risking their companies’ futures. Consider Kenneth Lay, Suzy Wetlaufer, and Bill Clinton. Kenneth Lay of Enron graced the covers of Business Week, Fortune, and Newsweek; at his peak, he was hailed as an exemplar of effective leadership by business schools around the world. Now he is facing criminal investigations and being brought before congressional hearings regarding Enron’s collapse. Suzy Wetlaufer was the editor of the venerable Harvard Business Review (HBR) until April 2002. Senior executives credited her with turning it around and into one of the most read and admired journals. Her affair with Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, who she met while interviewing him for HBR, resulted in her being asked to resign, contributed to the breakup of Welch’s marriage, and is now fodder for People magazine. And former President Bill Clinton had the potential to be exceptional as he led the United States through a period of sustained economic expansion and peace. His affair with a congressional intern led to him being impeached by the House of Representatives and distracted his administration from important domestic and global accomplishments.

As we read Hanna and Glassman’s piece on NTL and on the inner dimensions of leadership, we wonder if Lay, Wetlaufer, or Clinton would have faced their personal and organizational crises if they had devoted more attention to developing self-awareness and systemic change. It was not a lack of skills and knowledge that plagued these highly successful executives; rather, it was arrogance and a sense that they were untouchable.

As the business world becomes increasingly complex and often tumultuous, leaders must turn inward to realize their full leadership potential. They must learn to step outside their known patterns of behavior, patterns that have often brought them past successes. Doing so may jeopardize their status quo, but it will also build individual and organizational resilience to adapt, change, and grow.

We agree with Hanna and Glassman that leaders must make time for personal reflection and for self-awareness. Mini-sabbaticals that do not get overshadowed with book projects or turnaround endeavors can provide the pocket of time necessary for leaders to get away to focus. Coaches can work with leaders to enforce time outs and to create mechanisms for inner reflection and awareness. Or as Hanna and Glassman suggest, leaders can immerse themselves in the kind of rich learning experience that an NTL workshop might offer. Ultimately, sustained personal and organizational change is most likely to come from intensive leadership development curricula that are embedded within a larger organizational context, such as Hanna and Glassman’s Leader as Change Agent program. This is what truly matters the most in leadership and in organizational development.

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