

H O L I S T I C L E A D E R S H I P

Understanding the approach

by Sonia McDonald

A holistic approach to leadership recognises adapting and learning as a journey of life. Sonia McDonald explores how a holistic approach will make you a more powerful and effective leader.

What is it about Leadership in the 21st century? I rarely hear the term management, even though it is as equally important and you can't ignore the fact that the two work together to form a whole approach. As John Kotter once stated, "Leadership and Management are ... two distinctive and complementary systems of action". However, this article will focus on something greater than just leadership and management. In the many years I have been working in organisational development and leadership, I have never seen such a growth and hunger for learning around the term leadership.

Presently I am working with

some amazing managers and leaders who are experts in their field but mention the word leadership and they go completely pale with fear. How do they define

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leadership? What scares them? Is it the debate around are leaders born or made? Or is it the people they lead themselves?

Today, being an expert

in your field is vital but equally as important is the ability to lead your people and understand yourself as a leader. It becomes imperative for professionals to continually redefine and expand their knowledge of leadership. As a consultant in the field, I continuously read, research and discuss this subject and I am passionate about being aware of many theories, models and concepts around leadership. For me, it is about the learning, not only about what is the latest or greatest, but about my journey and making a difference in becoming the leader I want to be. And yes leaders can be made! Hence, my article will focus on the concept of Holistic Leadership being defined as



being able to lead from the mind, heart and gut.

Holism can be defined (from holos, a Greek word meaning all, whole, entire and total) as the idea that all the properties of a given system (physical, biological, chemical, social, economic, mental, linguistic, etc.) cannot be determined or explained by its component parts alone. Instead, the system as a whole determines in an important way that the parts behave (Wikipedia).

In turn, holistic leadership is the ability for a leader not only to understand oneself and lead others from this vantage point, but also the premise that each of us must strive throughout our lifetime to become a centered individual who is able to effectively use the principal components of leadership. Just as significant is to understand the importance of the whole and the interrelationships among the components. I see the components being not only as a leader who must lead from the mind, heart and gut but looking at the journey that leads the transformation at

the individual, team and organizational levels or even leading within your community.

One interesting article is Robert Cooper's (2000) "A new neuroscience of leadership" where he describes how the human fetus' three brains are developed. First the brain of the heart is developed, followed by the brain of the gut, which leads to the final development of the brain in the head. The article is a must read around not only the differences between these three aspects of intelligence but also the importance of these brains working collectively together. In turn, it is important for leaders to constantly develop insight and awareness into their brains. Knowing oneself and understanding how you look

the mind enables one to recognise, assess and understand how this brain contributes to one's beliefs, perceptions and behaviours. The book, Fifth Discipline: the art and practice of a learning organization by Peter Senge (1990) gives us great insight to something called mental models. A considerable aspect to the brain of the mind is identifying and working with our mental models. A mental model is an explanation of someone's thought process about how something works in the real world. It is a representation of the surrounding world, the relationships between its various parts and a person's intuitive perception about their own acts and their consequences.

Our mental models help

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at and interpret the world is imperative to becoming an effective leader. I have found through my work on myself and with others, that how one goes about this journey is as unique as each individual.

Exploring the brain of

shape our behaviour and define our approach to solving problems (akin to a personal algorithm) and carrying out tasks (Wikipedia). In addition, our personal experiences, history and personality contribute to the development of our

own set of mental models. It is also important for us to develop strong reflective and inquiry skills. How many of us take the time to reflect on our decisions or behaviour or even ask questions around this? In turn, by understanding ours, and others mental models and making necessary adjustments is one of the keys to becoming a holistic leader.

We as leaders need to understand how we, and others perceive, organize and make decisions regarding our world. In addition, the heart is the centre of what inspires, motivates and drives us. Too often I work with leaders who feel that their feelings should be checked at the door. Why is this so? Our feelings, provides us with invaluable insight and information. When we as leaders listen, we demonstrate respect and others and ourselves. Have we all forgotten some very well known motivational theories such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs or Herzberg's Motivators? As such Maslow found that all humans have a need to be respected and to have self-esteem and self-respect. One of the needs known as the belonging need, esteem presents the normal human desire to be accepted and valued by others. People need to engage themselves to gain recognition and have an activity or activities that give the person a sense

of contribution, to feel accepted and self-valued. This is where the brain of the heart plays a vital role in holistic leadership.

Finally the brain of the gut, or intuition as some may like to call it. This one is harder to define or explain when it comes to leadership. Leading with that gut feeling or instinct? One of my favourite books by John C Maxwell is The 21 of Irrefutable Laws of Leadership. One of his laws, believe or not, and I am sure you saw this coming was the Law of Intuition. Dr Maxwell states "leadership depends on more than just the facts. Leaders see trends, resources and problems, and can read people. The law of intuition is based on facts plus instinct and other intangible factors. A leader has to read the situation and know instinctively what play to call. Leadership is more art than science." The law of intuition is one of the more difficult leadership laws for many people to grasp and understand. The law of intuition recognises that leaders evaluate situations with their leadership bias. Intuition molds the leader's thinking and decision-making processes. Everyone possesses intuition within their area of strength or body of knowledge meaning they instinctively know how to react to a given situation by relying on their strength and knowledge developed through practice. Likewise, leaders exhibit the ability to

use intuition and instinct by leveraging their leadership bias. Intuition relies more on feeling and sensing rather than data or facts and figures. An excellent example in the book is around Steve Jobs who, when he went back to Apple computers, started making major decisions using intuitive leadership. His move to form a strategic alliance with archenemy Bill Gates was an intuitive move that could have failed. But his intuitive move worked and proved very successful for the company and stock values.

Holistic Leadership is present in each and every one of us. It is a journey and by opening yourself up to learning about yourself and those around you; you are on your way to becoming a more centered and balanced individual. In turn, holistic leadership can be powerful and enlightening; working with the entire components not just one alone. As such, as we change and grow, we as leaders must be able to adjust and adapt our styles to the circumstances and people we lead, and this must be done in the larger context of learning as it is a journey of discovery. Finally, I challenge you to take that journey to learning about yourself, those around you and to the many theories and models out there on leadership ... and as a leader, to make a difference.