

Releasing the Collective Intelligence of your Organisation

by Bruce Nixon

A shorter version of this article appeared as the Columnist Article: How to Deliver Collaborative Leadership in EuroBusiness June 2003.

“No top team can possibly understand the complexity and unpredictability of what needs to be done through the emergent workings of the collective intelligence of their organisation”

The Challenge

21st Century leaders are faced with immense challenges – unrelenting competition, instability, unpredictability and complexity. The pressure is to provide better and more with less. And there is CSR and sustainability. The only way to meet these challenges is through creativity. Organisations have to continuously transform and use the collective intelligence of the whole organisation. People need a culture that inspires them to see the huge challenges as exciting opportunities. It can't be done when people are burnt out, like the Brits, who work the longest hours in Europe. All this requires outstanding leadership.

I listen to a lot of people in a wide diversity of organisations. What I hear consistently is criticism of leadership. Of course people **do** winge and blame – a way of avoiding responsibility. However the criticism needs to be taken seriously. Top leadership is commonly criticised for: not providing clear direction and inspiration; a strategic plan which is boring, not emotionally engaging, not understood by the majority who have not been involved in its creation; thinking short term rather than strategically; putting short term profit and share price ahead of long term sustainability; subjecting people to exhausting waves of initiatives, rather than seeing through a responsive strategy and giving it time to work; not being clear about their role; not communicating the need for change and regularly reporting progress; holding back information that is embarrassing or uncomfortable ie a lack of transparency and integrity; not admitting mistakes or uncertainty about what to do; not taking people into their confidence; not giving people the freedom to innovate; not really taking seriously their own development and the development of others; not walking the talk – saying one thing and doing another; being autocratic and arrogant; above all, **not listening and involving people** in deciding what changes need to be made and how.

I think of one charismatic and, in many ways, enlightened CEO who almost ruined a good company because he did not listen to his senior colleagues – he had to go but by then a lot of damage was done.

People complain of a competition rather than collaboration at the top – is there a male pattern of undermining each other? There is evidence that female teams perform far better because they support each other. Leadership often fail to create a culture in which people can say what they really think, are fully valued, and thrive and give their best. People who dare often get fired but ultimately the company pays the price for lack of integrity – many examples are coming to light.

These deficiencies are obvious to people working in an organisation and they have a demoralising effect. You may not need a management consultant – just ask your people!

What is needed?

Basically, the opposite of all these things: clear, united leadership direction from the top; clarity about values, purpose and vision – an inspiring corporate ideology which is understood by the whole organisation and has its support; involvement of everyone in creating and implementing an emerging strategy; leadership behaviour and a culture that brings out the spirit of the organisation and everyone's energy and creativity. You need the collective intelligence of your organisation.

Top leadership need clarity about their role. Two things: 1) **provide an inspiring vision of the desired future** and 2) **enable people in organisation** to bring about transformation in an emergent way. Leaders need the best thinking about how organisations transform and adapt and what leadership behaviour encourages this. The task of leadership is to focus on creating a process that involves the whole organisation in the creation of change.

Two wise Americans say: *“In our experience, enormous struggles with implementation are created every time we deliver changes to the organisation rather figuring out how to involve people in their creation.”* Wheatley, M and Kellner-Rogers, M, 1998

What you can do? – a Top Team Strategic Retreat

First work together to co-create your agreed purpose, values, vision and strategy. Work on the **process** for involving the whole organisation and the implications for your own leadership. Beforehand ask a lot questions in your organisation and listen.

Here is a suggested agenda:

1. **Global Forces** What is going on in our environment, affecting us or likely to do so? What are the key trends? Think divergently, boldly and widely and not just in narrow business terms. Get someone to push you. What are the big issues facing us? Finally look for the opportunities.
2. **Current State** Rigorous review: How well are we responding to that environment? SWOT analysis. Which criticisms at the beginning of the article apply? The health and sustainability of the organisation? Is there enough diversity at every level for a healthy organisation? Do we encourage honesty and criticism? Do we encourage development sufficiently? What about spirit? What are our key issues?
3. **Our Purpose & Values** Inspiring corporate purpose and values; our unique difference
4. **Our Vision of a Desirable Future** for the world – organisations thrive by changing it; our organisation; ourselves; the culture we need.
5. **Strategy** to bring about this vision: how we will involve people, engage their hearts and collective intelligence in creating change; our unique leadership role.
6. **Key Issues:** out there; in our team; above all in ourselves – lets be really honest – how do we need to transform ourselves and our behaviour?
7. **Implementation and Support** How are we going to implement this strategy? How will we involve people in the creation of these changes? Who are the key stakeholders

we need to engage? What challenging and rigorous support do we need to provide for ourselves?

Having done this, take your strategy to a large group of people representing the whole system of your organisation and its stakeholders. Get them to say what they like about it; where you need to think again; revise it accordingly. Then get the whole room taking responsibility for implementing it and making plans to do so.

It could be exciting!

Bruce Nixon, Berkhamsted, UK. Facilitator, mentor, coach and author of *Global Forces — a Guide for Enlightened Leaders — what Companies and Individuals can Do*, 2000 isbn 1-85252-353 and *Making a Difference — Strategies and Tools for Transforming your Organisation 2001*, isbn 1-85252-353-0. 28-4-2003