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LEADING WITH ANSWERS

THE ability to make the best decision has always been a strong measure for leadership potential. It is as if the burden of having answers almost always falls on the leader's shoulders. The question is, in this era and time, should that be the case?

Margaret Thatcher, the first female prime minister of Britain is well known for the divisive opinions on her leadership style. While some admired her Iron lady leadership, others blame her for the downfall of Britain's economy in the 1980s.

Her leadership style could probably be best described by the modern term of "Authoritarian Leadership" characterised by unilateral decision-making and top-down command.

Historically, and not just limited to Britain, the concept of heroic leadership where leaders sit atop the hierarchy of information and possess full control is widespread. Leaders who do not exert such dominance are often thought to be weaker leaders. To be fair, control-and-command does have its place in an organisation.

Donald Clark, a leadership consultant, explains that for an organisation to function well, the four concepts of Command, Control, Leadership and Management need to be in synergy with the imperative that these concepts are carried out in its truest form.

For example, he defines Command as the skill performed by a leader to use a well-thought vision and to guide an organisation to ensure efficiency.

Control on the other hand is the skill related to providing structure in an organisation in order to enable effectiveness. Thus, it is understandable if leaders are seen as the people who make the best call for an organisation.

This is further reinforced by legacies left by corporate heroes such as Jack Welch of General Electric and Lee Iacocca of Chrysler who single-handedly turned around and grew their respective organisations. These legacies are still highly regarded and spoken of as examples of great leadership.

Nevertheless, somewhere in between satisfying our need to have a leader who can show the way and feeding the leader's ego, leaders find themselves not having all the answers and may not be as quick as they may have been before.

The transition into the knowledge era supported by amazing technological growth makes

it impossible for information to stay static and leaders are no longer sitting atop the information hierarchy.

For example, with the dawn of texting apps, dissemination of information in short meetings becomes speedier at lower cost and minimum human resources.

Thus, access to information becomes equalised among a larger audience which in turn puts leaders and their followers on an equal footing – information is no longer the sole domain of the leader.

Right now, "I don't know" could be a genuine answer from a leader, but how are leaders responding to this paradoxical need of knowing and not knowing all without reducing the trust levels that organisational research shows are already at low levels?

"I DON'T KNOW" – WHY AND WHY NOT?

Given the expectation we have of leaders to be trailblazers in creating their own standards, it is understandable why many leaders still expect that they can make the best call.

However, John Maxwell, well-known leadership guru, explains that it is okay for leaders not to know everything despite our natural inclination to want to be in the know (we probably don't enjoy being blindsided more than we realise). He emphasises that great leaders cannot afford to be caught in the minutia of daily detail or they risk losing perspective of what really matters.

In a world where everything is moving at increasing speed, the noble intention of a leader being involved in everything becomes a double-edged sword whereby efficiency is compromised, ultimately reducing the credibility of the decision. In addition, leaving the leader to bear the sole burden of making decisions is not sustainable given the risks of burning out.

Moreover, the *Ivey Business Journal* suggests that the heroic leadership style widens the gap between an employee's ability to be empowered and their tendency to be dependent – if they do not get a chance to step up to decision-making,

why should they seek to?

There may be reasons to discourage leaders from being the know-all but what about reasons to encourage the "I don't know" aspect of leadership? Curt Hanke, CEO of Shine United (an advertising agency in the United States) further details why "I don't know" is key to being an industry leader in this era:

1 Creates possibilities

In line with the concept of lifelong learning, even leaders have their blind spots and since it is humanly impossible or beneficial to be a jack-of-all-trades, admitting you don't know creates the awareness that there is exploration needed. The key is to be comfortable with the unknown and to embrace it as untapped possibilities.

2 Inspires engagement

With the awareness of untapped possibilities, a leader then plays the role of a facilitator of questions to help his/her team dig deep as opposed to being a know-it-all. This creates space for new ideas to emerge and these ideas are owned not just by the leader or each member, but the team as a whole thereby leading them to synergise at a higher level of performance.

3 Defends against complacency

In a fast-paced era, the biggest enemy of an organisation is an attitude of complacency especially when we are paradoxically living with increasing amounts of information but decreasing control over it.

Continuing the heroic leadership of knowing everything, or pretending to know everything, might curb organisational growth.

On the other hand, if the leader is comfortable with "I don't know" and migrates to a culture of "Let's find out", we might just find ourselves

in the interesting space of what Hanke calls constructive agitation spurring organisational growth.

4 Increase joy

While this may not be the most serious advantage of the "I don't know" culture; consider this: In a space where leaders readily admit they do not have all the answers, employees who are encouraged to look for these answers are likely to feel that they can make a difference and their opinions matter to the organisation.

That means, in addition to employees enjoying their work, they are also likely to be more productive resulting in better performance outcomes.

ANSWERABLE LEADERSHIP

Franz Kafka once said that in a battle between you and the world, back the world. What the world requires now is the answerable leader; a leader who is aware and accountable of how decisions are made for the organisation.

For that to happen, a leader needs to be agile enough to lead authentically on the spectrum of knowing to not knowing rather than just relying on their own judgment based on limited information.

Fortunately, there are numerous resources to aid leaders in embracing uncertainty such as Daniel Goleman's Kinetic Leadership framework (refer to table).

This framework suggests six styles of leadership that leaders can adopt in responding to a spectrum of certainty to uncertainty. At the end of the day, where doubt can be avoided and where leaders know the answers – state it with confidence and conviction.

But where leadership requires embracing "I don't know", perhaps it is wiser to admit to it and use it to build trust rather than allow it to derail one's credibility.

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Leadership Style	Description
Pacesetter Leader "Do as I do, now"	- Leader expects and models excellence. - Best for teams which are already skilled and when quick results are needed. - Overusage may lead to hindrance of innovation and overwhelming the team.
Authoritative Leader "Come with me"	- Leader mobilises team towards common vision with focus on end goals and giving autonomy to team to decide. - Works best in circumstances where situational factors had made an impact (i.e. new vision needed). Best in inspiring entrepreneurial spirit and vibrant enthusiasm. - May not be best when team is made of experts who knows more than the leader.
Affiliative Leader "People come first"	- Leader creates emotional bond and feeling of belonging to organisation. - Works best in times of stress or bouncing back from trauma or rebuilding trust. - Sole reliance on this style (i.e. praise and nurturing) can foster mediocre performance and lack of direction.
Coaching Leader "Try this"	- Leader develops people for the future. - Works best when leader intends to assist teammates in building individual strengths for overall success. - Least effective when teammates are defiant/unwilling to change or when leader lacks proficiency.
Coercive Leader "Do what I tell you"	- Leader demands immediate compliance. - Most effective in crisis (i.e. company takeover) or when actual danger is present. Can also be useful in controlling problematic teammate should all other means fail. - Should be avoided where not necessary as it alienates people, stifles flexibility and inventiveness.
Democratic Leader "What do you think"	- Leader builds consensus through participation. - Most effective when buy-in, engagement is needed or when fresh ideas are needed from qualified teammates. - Not the best choice when pressed for time or if teammates are not well-versed enough to provide guidance or perspectives.

What place does Margaret Thatcher's style of "authoritarian leadership" have in today's organisation?

