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Liberating Leadership: Challenging Leadership Myths and Building Community Leadership

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Thank you very much for this opportunity. And it's truly a wonderful experience to stand in this situation and see the assembled group here and to have some tiny feel for the sort of leadership that all of you are currently engaged in.

I want to talk today about liberating leadership, which is a topic very close to my heart at the moment. And hopefully it will give you some thoughts about how to expand the leadership that you're doing, and that you're supporting others to do.

I should begin with a thanks, this opportunity has been a wonderful, wonderful one for me to find out more about community leadership, about what you're all doing out in your communities. And it strikes me, as I've come to re-acquaint myself with what Rhonda and the team at Our Community have been doing, that that whole initiative is a very good example of liberating leadership. So I think we don't need to go very far to find plenty of inspiration today.

But what do I mean by liberating leadership? I mean two things. Firstly I want to argue that leadership needs to be liberated from itself, and in particular from a received wisdom, which is I believe increasingly narrow, corporate inspired and individualistic in its focus.

Leadership has really come to be something that everybody seems to be expected to be doing. Right through from CEOs to school children, everybody is being expected to show leadership. So this brings with it a problem that it's ubiquitous, and indeed, in a sense, almost banal.

So what you see often happening with our words and our language around leadership is that it becomes what I describe as McDonaldised. It has the sort of seductive look, it's sort of a bit familiar, the language, it's often loaded with apparently good things, visions and values, but it's acutely unsustainable. There is a sense in which a lot of the talk about leadership is curiously superficial. It really doesn't get at the complexity, the tension, the contradiction, the conflict that's often at the heart of good leadership work, of powerful leadership work.

So why leadership needs to be liberated from itself is that it needs to be liberated from these rather banal and massaged manufactured notions of leadership that we've come to have inflicted on us.

One of our good commentators on leadership research, and I look at lot of leadership research as you'd imagine, says that never have so many laboured so long to say so little. He's talking about the leadership literature there. It's curiously unappetising and not very helpful. So I think that we need some new ideas about leadership. And I'm looking to this group and to the next two days to help us do that.

The second way in which I think leadership needs to be liberating is that leadership needs to free people. The purpose of leadership should be about: supporting others to act; mobilising people to head in new directions; supporting people to value themselves, their families, their communities; opening minds to possibilities. The purpose of leadership should be about liberation. It should be about freedom. And yet, very very often, in my observation, in my experience, leadership does the reverse. What I mean by that is that it often enslaves people. It often seems to quarantine them into working in ways that are unsustainable, that are disconnected to what's really going on.

Leadership often seems to compel people to think they have got to do the great heroic quest, that they have got to be single-handedly producing visions and marching off over the horizon. So all of these forces around leadership I think often end up trapping people and enslaving them, rather than freeing them.

So the thing that I wanted to explore today a little more is how to do leadership in ways that genuinely free people. And I think that the way to do that is to step back and get a bigger picture on leadership. I think it's not until we do that that we actually start to unshackle ourselves from what I believe are very constraining ideas about leadership. So I hope that I can help with that process a little bit today.

I want to talk about what I call the five myths about leadership and the liberating leadership alternatives.

So myth number one. Here the myth is that leadership is always a good thing. Increasingly what we get are people simply calling for leadership. Much leadership thinking simply assumes that leadership is a good thing, and we just need more of it. Now, this really troubles me, because it encourages a certain silence around the purpose to which that leadership is put.

Of course an enormous amount of the leadership that we encounter, and that certainly I encounter in my work in the business school, is actually about advancing the interests of global capital. That's what that leadership is all about. But that's not really made truly explicit. And often the costs of that agenda are not made explicit either. So an important part of doing this work of thinking about leadership again is in making sure we have the purposes to which our leadership is put right front and centre of our attention.

When I first started thinking about leadership I thought the answers must lie in Harvard Business School cases. You see I work in a business school. And so what happens in that kind of environment is that you are often offered the CEOs of large multi-national businesses as exemplars of leadership. The most common one that I was exposed to was a fellow called Jack Welch, also known as Neutron Jack. He was the CEO of GE, a huge, enormously successful multi-national based in the US. He is now the Chairman, having retired from the CEO's position.

But I used to sit in audiences not quite as big as this but largish audiences watching videos and watching people talk about Jack. And people would see leadership. But what I saw was this fairly sharp talking person, fond of baseball and basketball analogies, talking about how important it was to be tough. And I didn't see leadership. Initially I really censored my own response. I thought, "Well look, if everybody else is seeing it there, maybe it's a problem with me".

But more and more I've come to think that it's not a problem with me, that we really do need to ask questions about what happens when we get handed up as exemplars of great leaders people like that. And I don't want to hop into Jack too much (it is a little bit tempting). You

might have read, probably about a year ago now he has retired from GE, but he has an amazingly generous package as part of that. And there was a brief kerfuffle because he had fresh flowers being delivered to his apartment in New York, just in case he ever happened to drop in there. And there was some sort of complaint about the cost of those sorts of perks. It was briefly in the news but not for very long.

We need to ask who we are being offered as exemplars of leadership. If you have ever been involved in leadership development programs, you probably would have been exposed to some corporate leaders as examples. You might have been encouraged to look at great adventurers, people like Shackleton and so on.

Now I'm not saying that these aren't valuable exercises. Nor that some of these individuals haven't delivered some great leadership. Or even that they haven't got things that they can teach us. My point is in all this fuss about leadership, we've sometimes been seduced by the possibility that leadership holds out. I think we are often seduced by leaders who seem to act as though they've got the answers.

The recent Enron case was a classic example of two leaders who managed to seduce everybody from the most senior levels of government, the White House right down, into believing that there was an answer to making more money. What happens is that shareholders, everybody gets seduced by this process. And the leaders themselves get seduced. It's a process I call 'double seduction', where the leaders get seduced by their own powers of seduction. It's a very dangerous cocktail.

So all these are reasons, going back to that first myth, to be very thoughtful about our purposes, to keep on articulating and reconnecting with them, to make sure they are worth leading for. And some of those purposes we need to re-value, purposes like well-being and happiness, not just material goals. We need to keep on valuing the interests of the least well endowed, and not simply assume that there will be some trickle down effect, or the cake will be bigger and everybody will benefit. So that discipline around purposes I think is a very important part of the work of liberating leadership.

Let me move onto the second myth: Leadership is a single-handed heroic performance by a visionary individual. It is often assumed that leadership is about conjuring up the great vision, and then leading the group to the great vision. Well in fact all of the evidence is that it is often the work of leadership to support the group to define the vision. The best visions are always open to adaption and change.

Let me talk a little bit about Christine Nixon here, because she is a person who I have done some work with. She, for those of you who are not Victorians, is the Chief Commissioner of Police in Victoria. And she tells the story that when she was being hired for the job. Steve Bracks, the Premier, said to her, "What's your vision for Victoria Police?" Now this is a really common question in job interviews, this is what people get asked all the time: "What's your vision and how are you going to lead us there?"

And Christine said, "Well, I don't know. I'll have to talk to some people". It's a very unusual thing to do. And what she then did was talked to people, and she didn't mean just talk to the usual polities and the bureaucrats and assorted others. She actually took herself on the road. And in a sense she went and talked to anybody who asked her.

For example, she got an invitation from a little Country Women's Association group, one up in Nhill, up on the border of Victoria. She said to her assistants, "Should I go?" And they said, "No, no. It will take all day." But she went. And when she went there were hundreds of people that had been mobilised. And what they did wasn't just an opportunity for her to hear from all sorts of people about what the police could do better, and what the police should be doing, but it gave them the opportunity to start together, and to provide support for this important activity of policing, which after all really, really needs to have the community as an active participant.

So this question about vision is an important one. If you look at even indisputedly great leaders, like Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi, they haven't told the people what they need. They have been careful to articulate some things that are very important to them and some ways in which they believe in people, but they haven't said, "This is where you must go". In fact they have done something quite

different. They have been quite careful to keep on working and encouraging people to feel supported, to define that, and do that work for themselves.

I've got a little quote here for you from a fellow called Ron Heifetz, who's at the Kennedy School, who patches this. It's a rather long quote, so I'll thumb through it quickly.

"We call for someone with answers, decisions, strengths and a map of the future; someone who knows where we ought to be going; somebody who can make hard problems simple. But instead of looking for saviours, we should be looking for leadership that summons us to face the problems for which there are no simple, painless solutions, the challenges that require us to work in new ways."

So liberating leadership looks a bit different from this great heroic model. It's necessarily a social process. It resists, or it may resist, the hunger that we often have for an answer or for certainty. It finds ways to support the group to do the work. It doesn't necessarily take the high moral ground, and wait for everybody else to catch up.

Sometimes it can mean very small micro behaviours – of really listening to somebody, of really paying attention when somebody is in need of some support. Sometimes it can be in the simple act of naming something that seems to be going on in your group or in your situation, but that nobody else has quite got the courage to name.

So there are the sorts of leadership behaviours that I think we should be focusing on if we want our leadership to be more liberating.

The third myth is the myth that leaders don't have dark sides. Well all of the research tells us that the very ingredients of leadership, the drive, the energy, the capacity to focus very single-mindedly, the charisma, all have dark sides. Part of our job, as people who are interested in this area, is to understand those dark sides, in ourselves and others.

All too often in the leadership literature though, what happens, and we've seen this a lot in the Enron case, is that when somebody just

slips over the edge and is found to do something bad, as in the case of Jeff Skilling and the Chairman, we describe them as a couple of baddies. They weren't great leaders after all. We thought maybe they were for a little while, but they weren't.

But where this really fails, I believe, is it stops us learning about the way that systemic conditions can often foster conditions for bad leadership. We really need to pay a lot more attention to the sort of conditions in which we all do get seduced, and the conditions that can often tip people across that fairly fine line between leadership and psychopathology. It's not a huge jump, and we need to understand it better.

So what can we do in this area? I think we really need to understand our own appetites, our own appetites for the answer, for somebody to come over the hill and tell us, to deliver us from the pain, from our suffering, from our difficulty mobilising things and getting things done.

We're all human. We hunger for approval, we hunger for certainty. We hunger for love. We hunger for belonging. It's part of our nature as humans. The challenge for leaders is to come to understand that about themselves, at least a bit, so that when we are in situations where we are influencing others, or we have the opportunity to support others, that we're not playing out our own stuff, or not too much anyway. That we can be, as I describe, a little bit less ego leaders, a little bit less captured by our own stuff and more focused on connection and working with others.

I think part of this is also about keeping a real sense of priorities, so that when you hear yourself put your life on hold again, when you hear yourself saying, "I'll just get through this particular one; I'll just get over this particular set of demands; I'll just get through this particular set of difficulties – then I'll have the time to spend with the people who really matter, to do the things that really count." When you hear yourself saying that, stop and ask yourself what's going on.

That anchoring back to the things that really matter is very important – all of course with great compassion for yourself, because we are all learners in this. Great compassion for yourself and others.

Next myth: that diversity, gender and bodies are irrelevant in leadership. I was on a panel just recently with a very eminent business leader, who said that gender's over as an issue in leadership. It was a bit hard for me, you can imagine, not responding to that one.

He went on to say that all sorts of other issues were now important – diversity issues, indigenous issues were all important in leadership. Now of course they are. But what that view reflects is a very common misconception, and that is that members of minority groups simply need to adapt to the norms and expectations of the dominant leadership approach, rather than challenge it.

This view is very, very pervasive out there in leadership circles and in particular in business leadership circles. It's a view that is sometimes called the 'pipeline approach'. It just says, "Well we just need to wait for all those people who don't quite look like us to catch up. We just need to wait for them to get the right experience, whether it's line management experience or whether it's the right geographical experience, we just need to get them to build their confidence and their competence and then they will move into leadership roles."

Well it's a ploy and it needs to be named as a ploy. It's a defence and it doesn't work. All of the evidence that we have available to us now tells us that there are still very many barriers to people who don't look like the norm in leadership roles. It's not a matter of there not being good people out there with the appropriate level of training and experience, good people who can do the job. This expectation that you just wait really needs to be confronted.

We also need to confront the fact that when people who don't look like the norm try to behave like the norm, then they often run into more difficulties. There was a very expensive and well publicised law suit in the US a year or so ago against PricewaterhouseCoopers, where a senior woman partner was successful because she claimed that she learnt to do exactly what she saw her male colleagues do. She reproduced their behaviour to the letter and she was discriminated against on that basis, because she was then seen to be trying to be too much like one of the boys. And it was offensive when a woman was doing it. Of course.

You can see that this is sort of tricky for those of us who don't look like the norm. The sort of feedback that women in leadership roles often get are firstly that they are not confident enough so they need to do assertiveness training. That they remind people of their mothers or their kindergarten teachers – I've had that a lot; I've been very bossy, very pushy, very trying, very controlling, very manipulative, all of those sorts of things.

Women often get the advice that they need a makeover. What does that mean? In the environments that I move in that means only ever wearing a navy suit or a black suit, always wearing stockings and high heels, not too high, not too low.

Women get feedback that they make people uncomfortable and they're scary. And the more power they have the scarier they are.

When I was first starting to teach, and had not been in the business school all that long, I was teaching reasonably large groups of mainly men. On this particular program I was teaching to a Management for Engineers program, so you can imagine the group, it was about forty blokes, and there were two women in the group, and they were in camouflage.

I'd been watching my colleagues, because when I first started teaching in this situation I was very unsuccessful. It was really tough. Often my students would come in to do battle with me. So I'd watched my colleagues, and I'd watched how really well-evaluated teachers taught. What they do is that they come into the lecture theatre and they'd look around and then they'd start to undress. They'd sort of start loosening the tie, and they might throw that to one side. And then they'd take off their jacket. Then they'd roll their sleeves up. And this was all about getting down to work. They'd also use their bodies, in this way they'd stride around the lecture theatre. They'd walk up and down the aisles. They'd look people close in the eye. They would use their physical body in a very, very powerful way. I thought, right!

And here I was, Management for Engineers, I walked in, started to get down to business. And you can imagine. I threw the jacket to one

side and I looked up. And there was complete horror! What will she do next?!

So, what this told me in a very mortifying way was that when women do the same things that men do, those actions are read differently. And that applies to leadership. And it doesn't just, of course, apply to women. It applies to men who don't look like the norm. It applies to men with different backgrounds who don't quite fit the standard. All sorts of additional expectations, unconscious stereotypes come into play.

So part of the leadership work around is in not just colluding with that, but in naming it, inspecting our own reactions, challenging it, opening up the space for greater diversity in leadership.

I want to just show you a couple of clips to explore this a bit further. The two clips are of two Australian leaders that I've studied. The first one is of Christine Nixon. And the second one is of Chris Sarra, who for those of you who don't know is an indigenous school principal in Queensland, who won Queenslanders of the Year in 2004 for some of his very amazingly innovative practices that he introduced in Cherbourg State School, which is a former mission area, with very very bad educational outcomes.

In both cases what we see here are leaders who have brought about really quite radical change in very moribund systems, in systems, organisations, environments that other people have given up on ever getting much change in.

I want you to pay particular attention to these two very different leadership bodies and in particular how those bodies support the work of leadership.

[Playing of Clips]

In particular I asked you to take note of the body work of leadership. Taking Christine for a moment, she was marching out of time there. She was out of time. She literally had to get the uniform specially made because it didn't fit her. Now, if it doesn't fit her, who else doesn't it fit?

In all sorts of interesting ways she empowered the police to have more flexibility about their uniform, to give them more choice about what they wore. But part of that was also opening up the police force to a very different body of people. She told me recently that one of the most moving things was at a graduation where the father of a police officer had just graduated. So there are some fascinating ideas about recruiting the police from all age ranges and all parts of the community, a part of opening up this body of the police, to be more diverse and more open.

There was also Christine's own insistence, and this was a big thing to do, to go the gay mardi gras march. By her very presence, she is doing some things that are affirming to the gay members of the police force. But she's also positioning herself in that community and saying, "We value you. We think you're important. And I'm going to be here, physically." It was quite striking.

Turning to Sarra, we have an interestingly different set of problems. His problem as a teacher was the absence of bodies. The kids were just dreadfully, dreadfully absent. And so what he did to help that was to pay attention to their physical wellbeing. He made sure that they were looked after, that the buildings were not vandalised. He paid attention.

In particular he talked a little bit about growling as a form of disciplinary measure with kids who were acting up. He got into trouble – growling involves getting up close with kids and raising your voice, making a bit of a scene, making them understand that this is really serious and really big time. And he says, "This is infinitely better for me than banning them from school. That's the worst thing I want to do". But it's been controversial.

And as you saw with Christine too marching in the gay parade got her in trouble with the Opposition Leader.

Liberating leadership in this way, challenging the norms, making space for different sorts of bodies to come in, to do the work of leadership, does involve risk, it involves courage and I urge you all in that direction.

Now the final myth that I want to finish on is that leadership should focus on achieving future material goals. I think we often get caught up in our leadership work around striving towards goals. It seems to be a really inevitable part of the process of becoming institutionalised or becoming part of a group, that you've got to think ahead, you've got to plan. But you know I think we need to be really conscious of not just being captured by that.

And I do it myself all the time. I think I can put things on hold. I think I can put my family, my life, my health on hold, until I just get through this particular subject or teaching period or whatever it might be.

But a lot of my recent work has been around encouraging people not to lose sight of the present; to be in the moment more; to see value in the connections that we're making right at this very moment.

I've been teaching yoga at the business school as well as my other subjects, and I'm sure it's far and away the most valuable thing I do. You see people stagger into the room at lunch time – they're exhausted, they've gone all out to get there. And then you see over the next hour, just with a little bit of encouragement to nurture themselves, to slow down, to remember what's important, you see them shedding some burdens, loosening up, releasing themselves. And you see them later and they look better, happier, more able to do the work that they need to do.

So it's a really important thing to find a way of bringing that discipline into your work. And now I want us to do a little exercise which involves this. What I'd like you to do is to turn around and find somebody sitting behind you that you don't know, and for about three or four minutes I want you to introduce yourself to each other and say a few things about the leadership work that you are doing right now.

[Audience carries out exercise]

I wanted to finish with that exercise as a way of underlying my belief that listening and acknowledging the work that we are doing, and that others around are doing, in leadership is a central part of liberating

leadership. And to urge you not to get too caught up in the future in a way that stops you experiencing that right now.

The Buddhists would say that getting caught up with planning and all that sort of stuff is really getting caught up in illusion, and it induces needless suffering. And we're all familiar with that.

There really is only the present, and it's very important to stop and value it. So thank you very much for letting me be part of it.