



Leadership – Targeting a change of hearts

This is a story I can't stop telling: "If you asked the people in her town: 'Who is Phanlany?' they would frown and ponder: 'Phanlany... isn't that the lady with the backpack?' Obviously Phanlany was not that born walking around with a backpack – she was born a happy village girl, the sweetheart of her grandfather. They had a special bond, as from him she learned to play the flute. She learned to play the notes, as she earlier had learned to pronounce words. But more importantly she learned to communicate the seasons in her soul through the music. That is why the birds listened, the children listened and the adults listened as she played. As she touched people's hearts she played at school, at college and eventually in concert halls, where many leading people would attend. To tune in to the music she would mostly close her eyes, but one day she opened them at a high-society event and was shocked: Some people looked bored or distracted. They had come to mingle with the crowd, not to truly listen. But how could they not be moved by her music, her most precious gift? From that day onwards she refused requests to perform in public, and became the gloomy lady walking around with a backpack.

"Recently, however, a curious girl stopped her in the park, asking her to show what she carried. Though she wanted to shrug the girl off, her hands were actually quicker than her mind and before she knew it she held her flute in her hands. Unsure whether she could still play, she brought the instrument to her lips, encouraged by the expectant, wide-open eyes of the girl. To her surprise she found she could still play, and before she knew it she played a sequence of songs, only to notice that a large crowd had gathered by the time she the last note sublimated in the soft breeze. A tear of happiness welled up in her eyes as she thanked the girl and the lifeforce that had sent her."

When I share this story with participants in our leadership courses they immediately get it: Yes, they were born full of hopes and dreams, and yes along the way they got hurt, whether it was through a dramatic event like a war, or a personal event like a harsh word at a moment that they needed attention. They down-sized their dreams and ambitions to the level of just getting by, and try to laugh away the nagging knowledge that they fail to become who they were meant to be. The invitation then is to use our training course to clarify who they want to be, and to re-evalate whether they can and choose to bring their innate wholeheartedness back to life.

The aim of leadership development

Then it's time to "get real": We don't invest in leaders simply to make them happy dreamers – we look for tangible returns on investment. And when it comes to improving organisations who doesn't dream of it: Vastly improved working relationships and leaps in achieving results? More fun and better outcomes. And so that's what we sell. But here's the catch: You have to pay the price – the price of moving first, the price of consistent follow-through, the price of vulnerability, the price of seeing everybody's goodness – not giving up on anyone. Eventually you may have to choose whether you fully adopt a new set of organising principles, though at first you can simply bit at it.



There's no shortage of spineless wishes: Our mid-level clients want senior leaders to listen rather than bark at them, and our senior clients want their mid-level managers to respect them rather than revolt. It's all for sale – but not for grabs. Hence our function as trainers, coaches and consultants. We're hired to confront and to cushion, to disillusion and to give hope, to challenge and to provide safety, to listen and to help our clients look deeply. See, what I called "spineless" wishes are profound longings at the same time. Mid-level management are dying to be seen, appreciated and given the chance to contribute to the best of their ability. Senior leaders are exhausted steering their staff to follow instructions, and many of them suffer from insecurity and desolation hidden behind a façade of confidence. So we invite our clients to share and we listen to their dreams and pains – the outpour from mid-level staff and what often starts as the silent denial of their seniors – a silence often meagrely obscured by loud and nerdy comments on management theories and definitions.

And that's not a fair description either – it is a critical synopsis of the trends we perceive. When we get to work, we park such biases. Here I expressed them, in case you are an investor – a CEO, board member or high government official, who considers boosting leadership competence and practice. It is an investment I deeply believe in, if we agree to work with the totality of reality. Thus I want to show you that we do not conveniently ignore the most challenging part of reality – the reality of attitudes and inertia – as many training and consultancy providers do. They know that investments go down the drain due to poor leadership and execution, but shrug their shoulders arguing that factors "beyond their control" are to blame. But who cares about blame? On our part, we care about results. While realistic and modest about what a trajectory of leadership development can achieve, we work with reality as it is, and that includes mindsets and beliefs; beliefs that determine our feelings about events, while feelings determining our behaviour, which determines our results. Merely transferring new knowledge and skills does not do the trick when it comes to leadership, because the continued application of competencies depends on beliefs and feelings – and we stand for a set of values and beliefs, willing to go against the mainstream.

Yet when we get to work, we relate to individual people rather than statistics. We park our informed guesses and take a fresh look. More importantly, we also invite our participants to take a fresh look. We invite them to forget about friends and foes, flexible and stuck colleagues; to take a look with new eyes. Not a naive or void look, but a deep and good look; a look of goodness – the recognition that by nature people are basically good and intrinsically motivated to contribute to meaningful results. That look or premise (which proves to be correct, but starts as an assumption) makes an enormous difference. Believing that people are basically good, changes the job of the manager from trying to push people to high performance through perks and punishments, into essentially creating space for greatness. We invite clients to taste what it feels like and what results you reap, if you aim to connect to everybody's goodness.

Some argue that this outlook is hopelessly naive and embarrassingly optimistic – good for John Lennon but not good for business leaders in high seas. But I am afraid I am more pessimistic than that: I have given up hope that aggression provides a shortcut to long-term positive results. I am a pessimist about forced behaviour change, rather than that I am an optimist about free change of hearts. I do not have high hopes for a benevolent dictatorship to diverge humanity from its suicidal trajectory – no rules and military will be strong enough to save humanity against its wish. It will not work and it is not what is needed. It would be called for if we humans were basically bad – though ironically in that case no one would even care to make an iron fist. Maybe that's a cause for some optimism: Seeing that even



the worst leaders act fundamentally from good intentions, misguided and frustrated though they may be. Sakyong Mipham, son of the revered meditation Master Chögyam Trungpa, speaks of the importance of checking our beliefs and aligning our approach and systems accordingly: “If we hold the belief that humanity has already failed, and try to limit the damage with a mediocre social vision, we are surrendering to an underlying belief that humanity is bad. When we stop believing in humanity’s possibilities, we stop building our future.”

As a pessimist I easily lose heart reflecting how much change is needed in terms of leadership behaviour and therefore in terms of deep-seated convictions. I doubt whether ever a majority of world leaders will feel, as Abraham Lincoln expressed, “malice to none and charity to all”. But, being a profound pessimist, I also see nothing else worth striving for. No quick-fix will hold and no army is strong enough to force humanity into a direction it resists. Sure, through pushing and negativity great things have been achieved – but how much more could have been achieved without it? Grim as the picture might be (though maybe the odds of bringing out our goodness aren’t as grim as we think), realistically we have no option but to aim at a change of hearts.

A qualifier on pessimism and learning: I once attended a training course myself and we did a filmed exercise on team building. One guy proposed “Let’s plan” (as you are supposed to) but without thinking I shouted “No, let’s just do”. It was overwhelmingly wonderful to see my own boisterous energy back on video, which I believed I had lost at that time. It was a huge learning, contrary to the lesson plan and out of sight of anybody else. Likewise I do hear from participants that our events have been life changing, even if at times the learning happened in spite of our best efforts. My above pessimism is in part because in choosing particularly to engage in leadership training in government settings we dive in a particularly dark corner. Honestly, when a training or coaching starts to be a dance, I can’t really maintain my trade-mark pessimism. But I do hold my foot down on the human heart. We all want high-fly and tangible results, but if we are too timid or embarrassed to check the foundation, it’s all just gimmicks. Loads of shops will sell you that, but I won’t – the song of the human heart is too fundamental to be conveniently ignored. We don’t need to drool on or become fundamentalist about it, but there’s something fishy if it can’t be named. Of course we accommodate hesitation on the part of the participants, but if from the contract client’s side there is a decisive allergy against touching our humanity, I wouldn’t know how to truly help,

Inviting a change of hearts

The challenge, then, is to offer glimpses of this mindset of basic goodness as an actual experience rather than as a hypothetical argument. Else it remains my belief against yours, and you have to live your life by your beliefs. Our trainings are therefore an invitation – an invitation to taste a new dish, so that afterwards you can decide whether you like it. Participants often object to new tools and approaches such as empathic listening or non-violent communication. They sigh that it is all good stuff for an ideal world, but that it doesn’t work in their organisation, that it doesn’t work in Asia, that it doesn’t work in government (whereas most management research we quote is conducted in Western companies). We encourage such honesty and scepticism: At the end of the day the key question indeed is what they believe in – outside of the training room they will and should not do anything they don’t believe is worth trying for real. But we also push back: We state clearly that we are convinced that what we share is fully relevant and applicable – else we wouldn’t share it.



And we suggest two things to our clients: To try our tools and dishes with an open-mind for as long as our training or coaching session lasts, and to bring in any real-life cases in which they doubt our knives wouldn't cut the cake. Then we role-play or discuss these cases, showing the power of our tools, and often leading to the next click of "so that's what you mean."

At this point investors start to get uneasy: "So you can't guarantee a change-of-heart for at least 50% of participants"? The answer is a flat-out: "No, indeed we can't!" While we would earn a lot more if we were not paid by the hour but given a realistic share of the profit clients encash from following-through on our work, we actually can't promise that a single participant will change. And we would refuse to. That would run counter to the whole principle we work on: That people are basically good and that, the more they realise this, they do good out of free will. Any attempt to coerce our clients into accepting our views or values would negate that these principles are true, universal, self-evident, right-on and worthwhile. The good news is that, because it's innate, in most cases we find that spark in our clients, and manage to connect to it.

Yet in this context we also discuss how the investor, who seeks better results, plays a pivotal role in nurturing the seedling we can jointly plant. He or she is in the same boat that every other individual is in and eventually has the same individual choice. Until a certain point everybody can test and explore, try and withdraw, change his percentage of engagement. But at some point it seems the choice is to dive in fully – to nurture the seedling or leave it to chance. There is no such thing as pocket-edition enlightenment. Maybe there is not even such a thing as 95% enlightenment. You may switch the light on slowly, but you cannot have it move on half the speed of light. You cannot get into half a rocket. At some point you believe in basic goodness or you don't, and you aim to manifest it fully or you don't. We have to decide whether, as Sakyong Mipham expresses it in his new book recalling his father, to be "someone who guards the earth not with the weapons of aggression, but with the armaments my father embodied: compassion, courage, and wisdom." We have to decide whether we want to work wholeheartedly on ourselves and our relations, even if others don't. We have to check our deepest belief and longing, and then live up to our answer. "Of course, we have to discover for ourselves whether it is true that humans and their society are good. But if we're not buying into that reality, then we are buying into some other version."

This is a choice for each individual, and an organisation could function beautifully if a few bright minds in different sections operate from that basis. But it seems the fate of the investor or leader to eventually decide whether this is the fundamental corporate value, and to decide whether to follow-through and align all actions with this binding principle. The leader who contracts us (be it the head of an entire organisation or the manager of a department) determines whether others are only individually encouraged to follow-through on what they learned, or whether this becomes corporate culture and direction. They determine whether our support is only building individual capacities, or sparks concerted organisational change. Hopefully needless to say: We are discussing a heart of mindset here – not a specific set of activities. When it comes to that, of course actions can be timed differently, in fact they have to. Enlightened leadership, to give it a name, is not a matter of once installing a new software and henceforth running the new default. Realistically it is a basic mindset behind ongoing efforts that you attune continuously to where all staffs are at.



Zooming in on feelings and beliefs

I'd like to share a single example of how one can start to direct the attention of a clients to his feelings and beliefs, recognising that they drive behaviour. We refer to it as a scan of the "intention-effect chain". It starts from an experience in which the current behaviour of a client does not yield the desired effect (behaviour) of a third person he interacts with. It captures the intention of the client and then scans his current beliefs, feelings and behaviour, followed by an informed guess of the impression this gives to the other person (in the below example a staff member of the client), and the effect to his feelings and behaviour. Thus we map out a chain in which intention and effect are ill aligned – as we started our mapping from a problem. Next we redesign the chain, starting from the desired behaviour of the third person, back to feelings that would be conducive to that behaviour, and which interpretation of the client's attitude would make that likely, which finally brings us back to feelings and beliefs of the client that could establish a positive chain.

Below see first the general, logical intention-effect chain. Second find the intention-effect chain as the client constructs it of the current situation, which is not exactly done in the exact order as the general, logical chain. Note that the interpretation by the third persons and own feeling of the third person are intelligent guesses based on knowing the person. Then find the redesigned chain as the client constructs it, generally working back to front. Note that once again the own feelings of the third person and his interpretation of the client's feelings are informed guesses, based on knowing the person and general positive psychology

General intention-effect chain

Client's intention

- 1 Client's belief, causing...
- 2 Client's feeling, influencing...
- 3 Client's behaviour, influencing...
- 4 Third person's interpretation of the client's feeling (as the client guesses it), influencing...
- 5 Third person's own feeling (as the client guesses it), influencing...
- 6 Third person's behaviour (as the client observes)

Current situation

Client's intention: That the other person does the work well

- 2 Client's feeling: Distrustful, stressed
- 3 Client's behaviour: Give meticulous instructions and supervise closely
- 1 Client's belief: If left to chance, things go wrong. I can force things to go right
- 6 Person's behaviour: Hiding from instruction, deliver work late and with mistakes
- 4 Person's interpretation of the client's feeling: Disrespectful, moody
- 5 Person's own feeling: Fear, dislike of the client, nervous, irritable

Redesign

Client's intention: That the other person does the work well

- 6 Person's behaviour: Working independently, ask questions if unsure
- 5 Person's own feeling: Trust he understands the task, trusted, relaxed
- 4 Person's interpretation of the client's feeling: Trusting, supportive, consistently friendly
- 2 Client's feeling: Trust or relaxed about bloopers, seeing goodness in the person
- 3 Client's behaviour: Friendly, delegate larger chunks of work, sharing why it matters, asking the person how he things of doing the task, sometimes give suggestions if asked (but stimulate own thinking even more, and appreciate all ideas as good starting points, even if some ideas are not helpful)



1 Client's belief: The world does not collapse if the person makes a mistake. The person wants to do well and will eventually come to me if he is unsure and sees my consistent kindness. My earlier beliefs that the world would collapse and that I could prevent all bloopers were unhelpful and unrealistic

Once this insight is grasped and recognised by the client, we check whether we need to work on the desired feelings and beliefs. In many cases the mere insight which new feelings and beliefs of the client could open the situation up, is enough to actually generate them, which we can test through a role play. It is fun to see clients embody and enjoy a new mindset, even if we tickle them to fall back in old patterns. In other cases we need to work on nurturing these new beliefs and feelings, for example by letting our client identify with "hero's" who embody those qualities, or by exploring how the unhelpful pattern came about in the personal history of the client. This is crucial work, but goes beyond the scope of this article. What the scan does is to point back at the client, to show that and in which direction he needs to change his feelings and beliefs, whereas until that point they often focus on pushing for changing the behaviour, feelings and beliefs of the person they interact with. This implies doing more of the same and is likely to deepen the problem rather than solve it.

In "scanning" we come to realise that kindness and decency remain the best and most robust "strategies" for obtaining reliable, great results. Write Sakyong Mipham in his new book *The Shambhala Principle. Discovering humanity's hidden treasure*: "Many may feel that kindness is impractical: it doesn't get us what we want; we have no time for it, or we have more important things to do. However, kindness is extremely practical, for it cuts through isolation, fear, and aggression. All of us can remember moments of kindness that changed our day, at least—and maybe our lives." He goes on to point out that "discovering our worthiness does not particularly guarantee that a better society will materialize. . . Building a good human society will take manual labor. It will not happen automatically. . . A cruise ship does not turn on a dime, and good fortune must be earned."

Imperfection and vulnerability

Writes Buddhist meditation master Chögyam Trungpa (who coined the term "basic goodness" as used in this article): "You have to admit to yourself that you are not a 100 percent ideal student. You improvise, you stick to your own neurosis sometimes, and you are cheating yourself, somewhat. As long as that is acknowledged, it is not regarded absolutely evil at all. How much of the journey is genuine and how much of it is hypocritical is very hard to sort out. As long as you keep doing it, it's fine. It only becomes problematic if you try to philosophise or rationalise the whole thing."

The connection to leadership development is two-fold: We invite participants to share their imperfections in a safe learning environment, were they decide how much they share based on how comfortable they feel – progressively clients come to know and trust our facilitation and each other during our journey together. The other connection to the above quote is that we as trainers and coaches are imperfect as well. Decades ago I hoped that by working hard on myself, I would soon be so perfect that I would never embarrass myself anymore. By now it rather seems that the greatest step to peace and joy is to befriend and be honest about ones imperfections. While I certainly do not intend to nurture my imperfections (the harvest is rich even without any cultivation efforts), I learn to admit them in our work, and they often become stepping stones. They have the double function of helping me to move on after a



poor move and generally be forgiven by our clients, and the function of showing them an example of how one can acknowledge and find some peace with imperfections.

In preparing a recent training my colleague and I identified the following qualities and potential pitfalls: My colleague's core quality and passion is to let clients feel completely accepted as they are. It goes beyond diplomatic lip-service or polite smiles – it is a deep longing and principle for her. Her pitfall in this regard can be to be content with mere satisfaction of participants and to compromise on impact for the client organisation, refraining to push the most sensitive buttons. My quality is that I deeply yearn to help people to deeply experience radically new and vast possibilities – and do not settle for blah blah blah and cheap client satisfaction. My pitfall though is that I sometimes try to force and resent participants who seem reluctant to make the leap I propose. As such we complemented each other for the benefit of our clients, even as we certainly also rubbed each other (probably also for the benefit of our clients). We wholeheartedly committed to support each other in the pursuit of our respective core values, recognising that ultimately our difference is only a matter of emphasise rather than that we do not care about the core quality of the other.

The other stepping stone in our work are our participants, and in particular the more vocal ones who challenge us, sometimes so it seems with the intent to undermine us. When this is the case, at least in our perception (we cannot read their minds and objectively verify), we take an extra breathe and try to recognise the basic goodness of such persons. While we might feel nervous, we extend our genuine interest and give them space, not to divert the training or engage in academic meta-discussions, but to understand their need – the positive yearning that drives them to seek attention, even if that drive is subconscious. Not that we speculate and intellectualise, we just listen and sometimes simply ask: What makes you ask that question; what is your need behind it? Initially that gives an awkward moment, but more often than not such exchanges help us understand, and at the end of the day participants who we first mentally labelled as “challenge” become our best friends, fans and teachers. Unlike silent participants, who pose a challenge in the opposite way, outgoing participants bring their passion right on the table. Our mutual vulnerability in exploring what bothers us or where we feel not understood leads to deeper insights and more awakesness as leaders than a smooth, pre-planned lecture.

Confidence in the view

Let me be honest with you: I love the work of Daniel Pink, author of *Drive. The surprising truth about what motivates us* as well as this year's *To sell is human. The surprising truth about moving others*. The point I want to be honest about is this: I don't love his research because it is counter-intuitive and surprising, as he claims, but I like it precisely because it confirms what I always kept believing. He shows that companies get better results when they do not use “carrots and sticks” (perks and punishments) to drive their staff to greatness, but when they make space for top performance. Against what particularly economists have been assuming (namely that humans are basically after best pay for least work), Pink points out that it yields not only higher job satisfaction but also better company results, when we act from the premise that people are basically good and inherently eager to contribute to meaningful results. I love his research work not because I have to radically adjust my own assumptions (which happens regularly, but that is another long and hilarious article), but because I can now express with more backing and confidence what I always felt. He helps



me believe what I believe, and have confidence in that view. As does Stephen M.R. Covey's *The speed of trust. The one thing that changes everything*. As does Simon Sinek's *Start with why: How great leaders inspire action*. All people who go against the mainstream, but find massive public resonance (in fact they are so popular that I actually wanted to dislike them, but their ideas are so good that I can't), showing how outdated our mainstream thinking and behaviour really is – and how ready people are to build organisations on truly human principles.

It's a huge relief not to doubt or be relativist about my core beliefs anymore and to recognise them as universal truths rather than as subjective, personal beliefs only. The passion and energy I used to waste on fighting and second-guessing my own insecurities, is now available to make a contribution. But there's a fine line (usually an invisible line) between the foundational insight of basic goodness, and the unwieldy multitude of convictions and crazes of the day. There's a difference between insights at the core of our silent being, and the produce of an over-productive, neurotic brain. What saves me from unworkable arrogance is that embarrassingly often I find myself crossing that line and biting bitterly into partisan views, forgetting that in practical issues your guess is as good as mine. And to counter my arrogance it also helps that the vast majority of humanity is still deeply invested in the opposite view, with almost all sectors and sciences still trying to predict and control the human animal through tight rules and regulations, providing such a target-rich market for our leadership services.

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