

New approaches to leadership shifts organisational cultures

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The worst thing a leader can do is believe that they know it all, but, says Chris Breen, Associate Professor at the UCT Graduate School of Business, in his many years of working with those at the top, this is one of the most common characteristics of SA leaders.

Breen, who runs the Leading Executive Programme at the GSB, says that companies often expect that 'know-it-all control' from their leaders and leaders, in turn, expect it from themselves.

"The danger with this is that leaders begin to believe that they do 'know it all' and in the process prevent new ideas and perspectives from taking root. When that happens, the possibility for innovation is severely stifled and the same mistakes are made over and over again," says Breen.

Consequently, Breen says that he spends much of his time working with leaders helping them to let go of this belief and idea of themselves as the hero and embrace wider ways of being. He does this primarily by throwing them into a state of chaos and complexity where they confronted by their own resistances and prejudices, sometimes in startling ways.

"The experience is often uncomfortable for leaders at first - they are used to believing that they control their world and know all the answers, when in fact the opposite is true," he says.

Breen is not a lone crazy maverick messing with the minds of leaders - his thinking is informed by the most prolific and influential thinkers and teachers in leadership today: Margaret Wheatley, Otto Scharmer, and Eddie Obeng. They all deal with harnessing the complexity and unpredictability in business through personal development.

Wheatley is an organisational consultant and author. She is the co-founder and president of The Berkana Institute, and a professor in two graduate business programmes. With a doctorate in organisational behaviour and change from Harvard University, she teaches those in leadership positions to shift from the 'leader-as-hero' approach to the 'leader-as-host' approach.

"If we want to be able to get these complex systems to work better, we need to abandon our reliance on leader-as-hero and invite the leader-as-host. We need to support those leaders who know that problems are complex, who know that in order to understand the full complexity of an issue, all parts of the system need to be invited in to participate and contribute," says Wheatley.

Obeng is an author and motivational speaker, founder and learning director of Pentacle, the virtual business school; someone The Financial Times has called "leading revolutionary" and "an agent provocateur".

"We have moved as a world, from an age when we could learn faster than our local environments changed, to one where the local environment of individuals, organisations and governments changes faster than we can learn." And when learning falls behind the rate of change, Obeng says, "It basically breaks everything". So, classic know-it-all heroic leadership approaches no longer work. Obeng calls for leadership from the front, not the top; leading by allowing others who may have better answers to fix things; leading without an entrenched knowledge and experience.

Senior lecturer at MIT, Otto Scharmer focuses on building people's collective capacity to achieve profound innovation and change and his Theory U stems from understanding that there are two predominant sources of learning: learning from the past, and learning from future possibilities; from the future as it emerges.

Scharmer emphasises the importance of an open mind, so as to learn, an open heart so as to work with others, and an open will, so as to act. The voice of judgement, voice of cynicism, and the voice of fear should be cast out as one "deepens the attention to the current moment" and becomes a host for change.

These ideas are not often taught at business schools because Breen says they are difficult, complex and uncomfortable ones to grapple with. But those who have been through Breen's programmes are enthusiastic about why it is important to make the effort all the same.

Regulatory and compliance executive at Albaraka Bank, Mahomed Vahed, says, since completing the programme he has noticed a transformation in himself and in his colleagues. Vahed took what he learned on the programme to his workplace to implement some of the new approaches.

"The Leading Executive Programme is remarkable. It is complete madness of course. There is no schedule. All is chaotic and really, you fly blind most of the time. But it worked. Not only did it show me all the ways in which I was not leading others effectively but also all the ways I was not living my life properly," he says.

He says that the greatest shift has been in the management style at the bank. "We know now that management is not about breaking people down, it is about building their character. We were on that command and control paradigm, above the line, monitoring people's performances. But something was missing: the human factor" he says, "It's amazing, the transformation. We've seen production levels rise. We've seen over-all satisfaction climb in employees and we hope to see, very soon an entire culture shift.

The course will run from October 16 to October 29. For more information, visit www.gsb.uct.ac.za/lep or contact Junita Abrahams on 021 406 1323 or 084 550 1660.

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