

# Ongoing Discussion “Thought Piece”

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Ongoing Discussion Host

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# Reflections on Leadership: A Perspective from Africa

By Anthony Duigan, JCP (South Africa)

*People blame their plight on the Government and its leaders, on management and its leaders. They may be correct. But will a change in leadership assure better living?*

W Edwards Deming  
The New Economics

Not necessarily at all, says Deming. So what should new leaders do to make things better? Libraries of books and articles have been written in response to that question, and we still seek more information and deeper answers.

Over the past 12 years or so we have worked with 50+ companies and organizations across Southern Africa, focusing on one aspect of their work – helping them improve how their people work with each other to deliver complex projects more effectively and happily. The last word is important. Delivery will happen, one way or another. How it happens is the issue.

Of these companies and organizations, only a minority seems have taken on board the real message. Fewer appear to have tried to live it out. Is the problem the message, or the process?

The message is a simple but well-founded one: win-win is a better approach than win-lose in a project environment. In other words, working collaboratively (across departments or companies) to optimize project inputs and resources to achieve an effective project outcome, produces better results than win-lose competition.

Actually, few dispute the message. It makes sense and the value-add can be demonstrated through many case histories across many industries and countries. The problem tends to lie elsewhere:

- The insecurity of the leader
- The current economic system.

## **Insecurity of the leader**

The leader is a reflection of his or her organization or industry. What's the established philosophy in project environments? Avoid being vulnerable (shows weakness). Brazen it out for as long as you can, then find how to off-load, ie mitigate, any responsibility. Being prepared to change these habits of working and relating means to risk being vulnerable. The only risk most business and project people are comfortable managing has to do with money and resources. Relationship risk seems to be off the spectrum of quantitative measurement (if you can't measure it, you can't manage it!).

Changing the way one works with and relates to colleagues, particularly those who are traditionally rivals for work or promotion, means moving from being comfort-centred, externally-driven, self-focused and internally closed to become results-centred, internally directed, other-focused and externally open (in the words of Prof Robert Quinn of the University of Minnesota - *Building the Bridge as you walk on it* - John Wiley & Sons, 2004)

In a nutshell, moving from selfishness (win-at-all-costs, low risk in relationships, keeping old work habits irrespective of how negative they are) to unselfishness (willing to risk and invest in robust relationships, seeking win-win ways to produce better results).

It is a paradigm shift. Some make it but often don't seem to sustain it. Why is that? Besides the personal challenge of continual change and discipline required, our economic system doesn't help.

### **Impact of our economic system**

Profit, growth, outgun the competition, survival are the business imperatives. On the surface, they don't seem to leave much space for unselfishness. But that need not be so - and it was not so when business started on its modern growth trajectory.

Prof Tom Johnson, well-known author and leadership consultant, expounded on this in a paper some years ago. Why is it, he asks, that "the current economic system seems to drive humans relentlessly to produce, consume and occupy more - always more, never enough". Two reasons, he says - the discovery of limitless supplies of cheap energy early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; and, twisting the original *raison d'être* of economic affairs away from providing human livelihoods to "quantitative abstractions" such as revenue, cost, profit and shareholder wealth. In other words, turning business from an "unselfish" provider into a "selfish" taker.

When the real driving force of a company is maximizing profit and shareholder wealth, it takes a clear vision, self-confidence and the courage of a strong conviction to do things differently from what the system demands. Many people in corporations and businesses recognize and decry the insidious nature of the winner takes all. But they don't know how to do things differently because they are "victims of the system".

There are many voices calling for a system change. But the salvation of a selfish economic system is ultimately a combination of the unselfishness behaviours of its parts. People, particularly leaders who can leverage their influence, authority and power, getting together in groups to break the old paradigm and build a new one on a strategic understanding of how nurturing relationships optimizes the value chain.

Analysis of the problem is the easy part. Building the new paradigm is the hard edge. How does this happen? One way to start is through leaders who think and act differently.

### **Leadership training**

JCP is involved with a small NGO training programme that takes 18 to 20 young Africans for a three- to six-week leadership adventure to an African country every two years. The aim is to expose them to a general skills set and to put leadership in the context of service and ethics. How to nurture and heal relationships is an important part of the learning. Two-thirds of the time is spent in the field - learning how to interact with peers, civic groups and political leaders and articulate their own visions. The other third is in the classroom.

The programme, called Harambee (Swahili for "pull together"), started in Kenya in 2003. The last one was held in 2009 in Ethiopia; the next will be held in Nigeria in October/November.

JCP's involvement started before the 2009 programme got underway and its role has been to help develop and facilitate the classroom curriculum. The fieldwork is put together by the NGO and its people on the ground in the different countries.

The strength and value of this programme, in my view, is the focus on new knowledge, specifically new knowledge of self. Each youngster has a mentor and each gets the opportunity to tell his or her story in detail to the rest of the group, and to listen to each of theirs. Healing is an important part because it's essential for building whole and balanced people who will contribute in the measure that they gain confidence in themselves as worthwhile people.

To date about 100 young Africans have gone through this training which began as an informal workshopping and has now begun to develop an own character. With the growing numbers of alumni, a network has been established to link them together in a support group across Africa.

## **Conclusion**

Tom Johnson talks of "Management by Means" as opposed to "Management by Results", meaning a radical change of focus from the "financial abstractions" that drive much of business, to one on the processes that support and nurture people and relationships. They are the means that give sustainable results. People will change systems. But they need to be given the tools - vision, good knowledge and self-belief.

## **Questions**

- What is lacking or not working in the leadership methods of many organizations today?
- What prevents these organizations from not learning and adopting new leadership styles appropriate for today's new situations?
- By what different methods or approaches can new leaders bring improvements in learning, working and living?
- How does one infiltrate new ideas into management?
- What can be done to change the focus of the current economic system on the drive to produce, consume and demand more?

## **Biographical details**

Anthony Duigan runs JCP South Africa, a consultancy specializing in developing collaborative working strategies to improve the effectiveness of projects. He has a background in journalism, public relations and corporate communications prior to joining JCP in 1999. He is involved in the Harambee Leadership Training Programme and, with his wife, is an environmental activist campaigning for improved planning and implementation of legislation against inappropriate development.