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Article by Carolyn Story and Sue Windley, Pragmatic Performance Management Ltd

Challenging Leadership Habits

The skills yesterday's successful leader possessed are no longer the guarantee for success they used to be in today's world where expectations run high and the increasing rates of change continually change the goalposts. Therefore today's leaders must look for new ways to communicate, motivate and achieve.

The Association for Project Management's 5th edition of the Body of Knowledge draws attention to how fundamental effective communication is to successful project management, highlighting how "Careful thought must be given to the choice of medium and its likely impact."¹ (Section 7.1). There is a massive body of work on all aspects of personality, behaviour, interaction and responses, but only now is there starting to be wider recognition in the business community for just how unconscious communication affects the content and delivery of messages. What we transmit unconsciously can have a devastating effect, or help to create a genuine leader. Therefore to ensure we continue to strive for improvement, we need to challenge leadership habits continuously – in ourselves and others.

"Behaviours complement knowledge and experience and are a function of values, beliefs and identity"¹ (Section 7.7). One of the most obvious outward manifestations of unconscious thought is people's behaviour – which when repeated frequently become habits. Habits are engrained; habits are invisible; habits are often denied... but our habits say more about us than almost anything else. Far from being invisible, an observer subconsciously picks up, reacts to and forms a first (and lasting) impression based on those very habits.

Under normal circumstances individuals are not under sustained scrutiny and therefore habits have relatively little impact on others. However, those in leadership and management positions are often looked up to as role models, or analysed to destruction when staff are looking for reassurance or clues about a business situation. This is when habits become key – they will either reinforce the desired messages or destroy them.

A genuine leader is aware of his or her habits, and will eliminate those which communicate unwanted messages. Contrary to popular opinion on body language, a well ingrained habit may not be 'telling the truth' – it may merely be the result of sustained exposure to someone else with the same or similar habit, and therefore emulated unconsciously. In other words, you can change habits of a lifetime – you simply need the desire and determination. Something of which successful leaders in all walks of life will have in abundance.

So the starting point is to 'know yourself' and find out what habits you really have, compared to the habits you think you have. The best way to achieve this is to enlist the help of a supportive friend who is prepared to give accurate, constructive feedback. And, as a leader, you will, of course, be prepared to receive this feedback in the spirit in which it is meant!

¹ Association for Project Management, Project Management Body of Knowledge, Fifth Edition, January 2006

The second stage is to understand what those mannerisms, actions, or words actually communicate to others – what is the difference between what you intend and what others perceive? This may take some research, and may be achieved by enlisting the help of your team if you have built up a relationship where two way feedback is a possibility. Again it is important to explain what you need, and why you want the information. Any input must be accepted positively, remembering that you may need to reassure the giver that the conversation is in confidence and the results will not be used for any other purpose.

Once this is done, you are in a position to eliminate those unwanted habits, and reform others which communicate ambiguous messages. Once again, this is easier to state than to achieve. Mirrors, friends, colleagues, other managers and leaders, and possibly a diary are all useful tools to achieve the end goal. This is a requisite for taking your first steps to becoming the successful leader you know you can be. And finally, for those of you who may be tempted to adopt a new habit, beware. This may have unintended consequences as ingrained habits can often be seen to re-emerge and adapt the behaviours caused by new approaches in ways you might not expect – or be able to control. It is better to let your true body language speak for itself.

There are many useful ideas and concepts which can help understanding of positive and negative habits – and their impact on others, including studies illustrating how reactions to habits are person dependent, situation dependent and context dependent which will be of particular interest to those of us involved in project management. Challenging Leadership Habits is our introduction for you to the world of Emotional Intelligence (EI): an ever-widening field of research and enquiry that is repeatedly demonstrating how the ability to know oneself impacts directly on the profitability, efficiency and achievements of the most successful organisations. APM's Body of Knowledge requires you to exercise leadership "...at all levels within the project." (Section 7.3) 1 and Emotional Intelligence is the key to "Sensing what people need in order for them to perform most effectively...".

Daniel Goleman² is one of the best known proponents of the far-reaching effects that Emotional Intelligence has on leadership and organisational success: his five EI Competencies provide an excellent framework to gain understanding about the all-important dynamics of relationships and communications. His book "Working with Emotional Intelligence" presents excellent examples of the application of EI and its effects on all levels of leadership.

In addition, our own organisation Pragmatic Performance Management continues to research the 'X-factor for motivation' - how experiences, beliefs, culture, and society play a major part in defining how individuals view the world and how awareness of these factors can aid project and business success. We would welcome your views, experiences and contributions to this continuing debate.

Contact us at info@pragmaticpm.com or website for further information www.pragmaticpm.com

² Daniel Goleman 1) Emotional Intelligence, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 1996 2) Working with Emotional Intelligence, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 1998