



Image: thedailyblog.com

Choosing Leaders

The Dalai Lama describes in his autobiography how when 19 years old and the new leader of Tibet he was tutored by Chairman Mao on the important aspects of running meetings (including consulting with the participants).

Maybe not what others would have thought the make or break area in leadership? In an environment where political and business leaders turn over rapidly, this does raise the issue – are those choosing new leaders focusing on what matters?

For example, business leaders spend a lot of time supporting and developing their team members. Getting a line on how good their listening and coaching skills are is not always built into the selection brief. And how do you assess those skills anyway?

First of all – the easy part of choosing new leaders – the what you see is what you get aspect. Candidates have a track record, and that tends to be consistent. Do they lean right or left? Are they Collegial or self-serving? Diligent or spontaneous? Voters deduce behavioural patterns from what they see and hear. Good interviewing – focused on what the candidate has achieved (or not) in the past can also produce an objective track record. A salient personality characteristic is ‘agreeableness’ – more agreeable leaders are more inclined to build coalitions, find common ground and attempt win-win solutions. The less agreeable, more competitive political leaders are looking to energise a base by targeting a competitor or foreign threat (such as labelling a pandemic as coming from a particular country).

In choosing a leader you are helping to define the sort of behaviour you want to encourage in an organisation, and similarly setting the cultural style that will emerge in a political party.

It is likely that just as Jacinda Ardern has shaped the Labour part of the Coalition Government to be more about getting along, that Judith Collins will nudge the National Party towards a more combative, challenging style – less nuance and more hard edges.

Identifying style is the easy part – and we do that almost intuitively. What is often missing in action when choosing leaders is assessing the substance side of leadership – the making it happen stuff. How does the potential leader run a meeting to ensure that good plans are developed, and participants are motivated to action them? How do they maintain connections with a wide range of stakeholders to ensure that they are tuned into the signals that could indicate there are unforeseen issues about to surface? How do they make and communicate decisions when relevant information might be hidden or slow to arrive?

The practical way to learn the extent and depth of the candidate's skills is to create situations which require action and then to carefully observe. Organisational psychologists are trained to do this – and the research indicates that they are better observers – presumably because they are looking for behaviours, rather than using bias-inducing intuitions.

As noted above, it's important to cover off what are the actual moments of truth in the work of that sort of leader. If they are likely to be guiding a ship-wrecked crew to safety, then creating that scenario would be useful. If they are managing the different views of different stakeholders – then bringing in others to represent these unique perspectives and asking for the leader to shape a resolution would be on the money.

The risk is going for what seems like the most visible or obvious situation, and over-weighting that. We can probably visualize a politician (or two) capable of making scintillating speeches but not brilliant in other key results areas. Similarly, the business leader candidate who wows in a formal interview with the Board, but has issues in managing other sorts of relationships. In choosing any leader – what do we want them to do? What are the moments of truth? How can we get an accurate preview of how the candidates behave in those moments?

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