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Anyone? Anyone? Anyone?

Richard A. Swanson

I love the scene from that old movie, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), where the painfully boring economics teacher played by Ben Stein throws out a question to the class and then prods the zombie-like students for an answer: "Anybody? Anybody? Anybody?" Nobody responds, and Stein goes on to answer his own question.

This is not an angry editorial. Rather, it is an expression of bafflement at the weak response to an existing state of affairs and some thoughts about the role HRD can play in engaging people in systems that fundamentally affect their lives.

There are extraordinary and exemplary leaders threaded through the leadership maze of the United States. However, I have never sensed such a leadership void in the United States. While I have experience in other nations, I feel more confident in restricting my comments to the United States. Given today's global economic, technological, and military forces, the consequences of incompetent or unethical leadership can easily result in war, losses of financial savings for thousands of people, and obscene self-serving greed.

My provoking questions are: How do the people we have overseeing so many business, government, and educational organizations get there in the first place? How do they continue to bore and manipulate us with inane logic? And how is it that we continue to respond to these conditions in manners similar to the teenagers in Ben Stein's history class: staring out the windows, goosing each other, and resting our sleeping heads on our desktops? Are these questions relevant to the human resource development profession? "Anyone? Anyone? Anyone?"

Leadership Crisis

There are two underlying aspects to the leadership crisis in the United States: capacity and integrity. Ultimately I believe they are connected.

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Chief executive officers, presidents of nations, and governors of states are mortal humans. It is probably safe to say that most are at least of average intelligence. I regularly tell students in my graduate classes that they and their classmates are as intelligent as the CEOs of major companies.

In my judgment, the complexity of the demands placed on leaders has greatly expanded, while the capacity of the pool of candidates for leadership positions has remained the same. Leaders are facing more demands than the capacity they personally have to handle them. This observation may be why Lucy Kellaway, *Financial Times* columnist, has estimated that 83 percent of chief executive officers fail (Ormerod, 2005). The mechanisms for coping in top-level pressure-cooker jobs include oversimplification, avoidance, new methods, lying and cheating and greed.

Oversimplification. Leaders who do not understand or acknowledge the complexity of a situation are showing sure signs of limited capacity. I once worked with a Fortune 500 CEO who made all his decisions based on a simple economic model. He never had to intellectually or emotionally deal with the people side of business (employees or customers) or the real nature of the business itself. Applied consistently, his simple economic model did keep the company afloat and attractive enough that it was bought out by a competitor for a strategic component. The new owner sold off the unwanted pieces.

Avoidance. In a former faculty position, I worked under a college dean whose simple model appeared to be that things would work themselves out and not to make any decisions unless forced to (so as to avoid conflict). His painful tenure ended up increasing conflict and numerous lost opportunities for excellence.

In both this instance and the preceding one, the leaders did not want to know anything more about the systems they were overseeing. They refused to listen to information from advisers providing information beyond their shrunken, incomplete, and inaccurate views.

New Methods. Intelligently embracing new and innovative methods offers the promise of expanded system capacity. Engaging employees and customers in analysis and decision making through new rational strategies, policies, and work methods moves the human capacity question to the work team rather than the person at the top. A simple example is Kellogg Company's using the Internet for getting and giving customer information (Steinberg, 2006) and the use of structured on-the-job training as advocated by Jacobs (2003) for the purpose of empowering all employees to be trainers of their particular expertise.

Schizophrenic use of new methods can be counterproductive. One wonders what would have happened to Ford Motor Company if it had stuck to CEO Donald Peterson's 1980s commitment to quality? The follow-up Ford CEO, Red Pohling, ditched Ford's commitment to quality for something else.

Lying and Cheating. Children who find themselves in a losing position often try to change the rules in order to win the game. Unlike the relatively even playing field of the playground, adult leaders are often insulated from much of the system they are meant to serve. Unlike the playground, they can be secretive in their decision making. This is why vigilance is required. The late Ken Lay, convicted former CEO of Enron Corporation, oversaw accounting fraud amounting to $1 billion in employee pensions and the loss of five thousand jobs and huge shareholder losses. Even after the collapse of Enron and before his criminal conviction, Lay spent lavishly: $32,000 for a trip to Park City, Utah, and $200,000 for his wife's birthday party (Ken Lay escapes justice with death, 2006). His capacity for changing the rules even led him to the White House. Lay was the top financial supporter of President George W. Bush and had private energy policy meetings with Vice President Richard Cheney. Anyone? Anyone? Anyone?

Greed. It is important to be reminded of the delusionary effect that money and power can have, along with the resulting behaviors of greed and dishonesty. While there are always inspiring exceptions, greed seems to go with the territory.

Ben Stein, economist and media entertainer, recently mused: "When I was a lad, the chief executive of a major public company was paid 30 or 40 times what a line worker was paid. Now the multiple is 180! Why, as we are being killed by foreign competition, do we need to pay our executives so much?" (Stein, 2006, p. BU-3).

Greed on the part of organizational leaders leads to deep distrust. Those working in the organizations and society as a whole cynically view greedy leaders as unethical, uncaring, and unfair. These leaders are suspect when it comes to sharing the gains of the organization. When organizational leaders exhibit extraordinary greed, as did William McGuire, CEO of UnitedHealth Group, employees and stakeholders will likely withhold support and information. William McGuire took $1.6 billion in stock options (beyond his extravagant salary) in just one year (Forelle & Bandler, 2006). At $58,000 a year, a nurse would have had to have worked from 500 B.C. up to the present day to earn the bonus money that McGuire made in one year (Coleman, 2006). Such personal greed at the top of an organization has to have an effect on those throughout the organization and the society in which such greed takes place. In this case, investor negative reaction to this news caused a serious loss in market value for UnitedHealth (Forester, 2006).

"The titans of corporate America are getting as much as they can get away with and hiring lawyers and public relations people if there is a problem" (Stein, 2006, p. BU3). Paralleling this time of leadership greed, economist Paul Ormerod (2005) reports that social mobility has declined since 1970. Social-democratic thinking has historically prized such upward mobility. Stein (2006) asks in his essay on greed if we are simply maintaining an America that is a financial neighborhood, void of a brotherhood and sisterhood. Ken Lay, former CEO of Enron and convicted criminal, died and never spent a day in jail. Anyone? Anyone? Anyone?

Response from the HRD Profession

These high-level shenanigans may seem beyond the HRD profession. They will be if that is where the profession chooses to be positioned. The alternative is to proudly note that organizations are human-made entities with all the strengths and weaknesses human beings bring to the table. This is the domain of HRD. Other than HRD, there is very little infrastructure in most organizations that upholds the potential and integrity of the people throughout the organization. Clearly, help is needed. Anyone? Anyone? Anyone?

HRD professionals have the privilege in most organizations of getting close to the people and their work and working across functions in ways that are unique. They can hear, see, and know things of which others are unaware. It is this information base, from studying the organization and the people in it, that serves as the basis for proactive wise counsel back to everybody in the organization and especially to its leaders.

Voice of the Stakeholders. HRD professionals should become a responsible conduit for facilitating idea sharing throughout the organization. In touchy situations, HRD professionals should establish mechanisms for soliciting and sharing ideas when the power interests are at odds and disproportionate. And they should have clear decision rules about confidentiality in doing this work.

Humane Response Time. HRD professionals should learn to carry the message to stakeholders at various levels in the organization about the appropriate intensity and timing of their actions. As the country western song about card playing goes, "Know when to hold 'em, fold 'em, and play 'em." My former dean unable to make a timely decision needed to be confronted about the consequences of his nondecisions, the fact that no decisions were decisions, and that his indecisiveness had large negative consequences.

Fairness. HRD should relentlessly advocate a rational range of equity in the distribution of financial and nonfinancial rewards and recognition throughout the organization. Everybody is not equal in terms of their expertise, effort, contributions, and results that are important to the organization. HRD should not be in the business of hosting pity parties. But when CEO William McGuire takes $1.6 billion in stock options in just one year, this is beyond fair. McGuire did not invent this company (he is not Bill Gates of Microsoft); he was an employee. HRD professions could begin open discussions in an organization aimed at establishing policies around fairness.

Conclusion

HRD professionals who agree with me that there is a leadership void in their organizations need to make a fundamental decision to respond or not respond. In helping to make this decision, it is essential to believe that the ethical theory and practice of HRD is important for sustaining the success of any organization. HRD professionals must first be fully convinced of this. They then must convince their organizations of it through word and deed. Finally, they must exhibit the courage to act so as to help make their organization a better place.

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