

Presentation for IQPC 18 April 2007

Becoming an authentic leader and injecting innovation into your organisation

I really like the word authentic - as it means both genuine and original. And, without genuineness, without sincerity, there can't be trust and without trust there is no possibility of leadership. Because, and this comes as a disappointment to some, a leader is the choice of the people who follow. To put it another way, followers create leaders, leaders do not create followers. And originality is the source of innovation. To put that another way, it is the definition of madness to think that you can change anything by continuing to do what you have always done. So, as Six Sigma, lean etc. are all about change, I assert that authenticity is vital.

But enough of that. What I really want to talk about are my thoughts about leadership and my approach to this which I call *daring leadership*. Once upon a time, whilst I was working for Fujitsu ICL I was lucky enough to attend a course at the Haas Management School in Berkeley - at the University of California. Some 30 ICLers, from across the world arrived on a Sunday and that evening there would be the kick-off event - we were to be treated to a lecture by Ben Zander. For those of you who don't know him Ben is both a management guru and the conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra. His book *The Art of Possibility* is well worth a read. Anyway, Ben puts on concerts for disadvantaged kids and subsidises this by the fees from his speaking engagements and on this evening near San Francisco, as the Boston Philharmonic had been playing here the previous evening, he was available to speak us at the start of a leadership development course.

Ben has a number of extremely interesting views on leadership but much is based on *possibilities*. About creating as many possibilities as you can so that you are not constrained by your own personal, limited, interpretation of the world, as if it were a solid truth. And one of the key ways of creating possibilities, according to Ben, is to always treat everyone as an *A class* student. Ben characterises this as *transporting your relationships from the world of measurements into the universe of possibility*. It also serves to deal with your *already listening*. Already listening is that little voice in your head that tells you what is going to happen before it actually happens. It informs you that Jill or John is not going to do what it is you want, possibly not even able to do what you want, so you might as well spare your breath, and then you won't be disappointed. It means that you ask Jill for something less than you actually want and then, when you get less than you actually wanted, the little voice tells you that you were right all along. You always knew that Jill would not deliver. *When you give an A to people you find yourself speaking to them not from a place of measuring how they stack up against your standards but from a place of respect that gives them room to realize themselves. So, the A is not an expectation to live up to, but a possibility to live into.*

Ben started to speak and informed us that (as he is also a world class pianist) he was going to illustrate his talk by playing Chopin's prelude in E minor. There was only one issue with this, although it was a fairly big issue - Berkeley had provided a piano stool but no piano! Instead of the piano there was only a desk. Undeterred Ben outlined his leadership philosophy whilst *playing* the prelude on the desktop. He asked whether any of us knew the tune, but few of us did, so he continued to drum on the desk but now started to hum as well.

Ben's beliefs include the notion of *giving way to passion* – releasing your self control so that you thoroughly participate in what it is that you are doing. When playing the piano giving way to passion leads to *one buttock* playing rather than the more static, traditional, two buttock playing. So, Ben illustrated one buttock playing whilst even more enthusiastically drumming his fingers on the desk and with some slightly louder humming.

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He came to a halt soon after, the prelude only being some 3 ½ minutes in length, completed his talk and then remained with us during dinner. He sat next to Matti. Now Matti is a Finn and like many of his compatriots not given to unnecessary speech. However, on this occasion Matti was talking non-stop and Ben did not seem to have much to say at all.

The week progressed and on the Friday afternoon, at the end of the course, we were treated to an afternoon at John Cao's *Idea Factory*. This is effectively a play school for management teams where they can come and work through their issues in a more right brain way. So, there was a photographic and art studio, a sandpit, a magician, a group of actors who could rap your supply chain problems or create an Agatha Christie mystery out of your acquisition angst – and there was a full orchestra of instruments.

Shortly after arriving, and completely unannounced, Ben Zander walked in. He sat down at the piano and said "*ladies and gentlemen, Chopin's prelude in E minor*".

He played for the 3 ½ minutes – using the one buttock style – got up from the piano, stated that Matti would explain what was going on, and left. He can't have been in the room for more than 5 minutes in total. We turned to Matti. What he had said to Ben on the previous Sunday evening was that he had been insincere and inauthentic. That by not checking that Berkeley had a piano available he had not treated us as A class students. That by asking whether we knew the piece, and continuing when he knew that we did not, his already listening was saying something like *I can't be bothered to check out this venue. It doesn't matter that this lot aren't really hearing this piece; they would not really understand it anyway, so this is good enough for them.*

Seemingly Ben was so taken back by this challenge, and so concerned by his perceived lack of integrity, that he had flown from Boston to San Francisco and back to play a 3 ½ minute piano piece to 30 people he would probably never see again. I can't easily explain how I felt at that moment except that it was the most wonderful feeling and I believed that I could walk on water. I become conscious of just how much being treated as an A class student meant in terms of my own self belief and realised that I wanted to create the same feelings in the people I work with. I also realised how difficult this would be in practice as the words are easy but living up to the actions would not be. But, the main lesson I learnt from Ben was that it's OK to **dare to be wrong** and to own up to it for the sake of your authenticity.

This story about Ben came back to me several years later when I was just starting a new job at Alstom Power, the merger of the power engineering businesses of Alstom and ABB. I was the new corporate quality director working out of the new Brussels headquarters for the new managing director Alexis Fries. I knew why he had hired me. My professional background is in sales and project management. Alstom Power had a new gas turbine that would give them a large market share in the increasingly deregulated global market for power generation. They wanted someone to hone their sales and project management processes now that the development was complete. I was their man!

Anyway, I turned up at the office at nine o'clock on Tuesday morning having bought a car, registered with the commune and moved into my new apartment in Brussels on the Monday. I was scheduled to meet with Alexis and discuss my objectives in some more detail. He started by saying "*we have a product problem*". Seemingly in the month between my accepting the job and my turning up to start they had found a major design or manufacturing flaw with the GT24 engines. There was already a fleet of some 70 of these out in the field and suddenly, long before the predicted end of life, the turbine blades started to fail. There was no immediate remedy so they had decided to withdraw the product from the market. Consequently, the new sales process was not needed and without any sales, you've got it, the new project management processes were not needed either, so, taking this to its logical conclusion - was the new quality director needed?

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I stared at him, fully knowing that had he wanted someone to review the product development and manufacturing processes he would not have chosen me. He would have chosen someone with technical expertise rather than someone who did not even sit 'O' level physics and was still unable to spell engineer. But, at that moment seeing my despair he said, and apologies to any Austrians in the audience, *I bought you because you were boiled in different fat, so please don't jump into our fat and try to taste the same as the rest of us. We have 50,000 people in this company, 49,999 of them have a degree in mechanical engineering, it's probably sufficient!*

I had an A class student moment, a stare into a possibility to live up to and I promised myself, and Alexis, that I would stay until the product problem was resolved, which I did, although it took over 2 years.

However, immediately after the A class student moment, I had what I call a *reverse Forrest Gump moment!* Forrest Gump, in the 1994 film of that name, was a man of low intelligence who was too stupid to realise the consequence of his actions but inadvertently accomplished great things and was present during significant historical successes. He exceeded beyond what anyone imagined he could do and rose above his challenges. Ho hum! Here was I, presumably a woman of some reasonable level of intelligence but who was not going to realise the consequence of her actions so would inadvertently bring about disaster and be present during significant failure. She would foul up beyond anyone's imagination and flounder under the challenge. Who was I to imagine that I could deliver what I had promised Alexis? But then I remembered what he had said to me and his gift of allowing me to taste different, and to be different. I only had to ***dare not to know - to dare not to know*** the answer.

And then it came to me, I might not know how to solve this but I knew a man who could, in fact I knew 49,999 of them! Along the way I was told that the design engineers from different teams would not work together; that the Swiss would not learn from the Swedes, that the Germans would not collaborate with the French, that the Czechs would not help the British. But not so! And, I refused to allow this restriction into my head. How would it help? It didn't extend the range of possibilities nor did this preconception treat the designers as A class students. And, in practice I found that the design engineers and people in production actually wanted to work together to solve this problem, they only needed to be given the permission to do so. As a result of their interaction the problem was finally resolved and I had learnt a valuable lesson. It was actually better not having subject matter expertise. I could do better in point of fact to perfect my Forrest Gump approach, the one of asking the stupid questions like, "*why does it take so long?*" or "*why does it cost so much?*", without feeling stupid and without making anyone else feel stupid either.

It was such a liberating feeling, that I've tried hard to recreate it since. It's probably why I'm now in financial services, another industry I know nothing about! What I needed to learn was that I did have something to contribute; it was just not technical insight. It was all of my experience that counted and which gave me my different taste. And it's all of your experiences that make you who you are - unique, precious and different, and, I suggest that this allows you to ***dare to be different*** too.

Because if we have to fit in, if we have to do what people expect us to do, if we have to be who people expect us to be - how does that resonate with innovation? How does that align with leading – given that leadership comes from showing the way? And that thought reminds me of Timo – another Finn. Timo was the country director for ICL Finland when we had corporately decided to roll out a customer focus programme across all geographies. The British team, based out of the galactic HQ in West London designed, developed and produced a programme and planned their world tour to introduce this to the waiting masses. I was assigned Finland and I remember well the kick-off meeting in Helsinki. Timo had assembled his management team and some 20 people, Jarmo Laaksonen, Lauri Gorski

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and Pekka Pitkainen etc. were waiting in conference room one. I made my presentation, described the reasons for the programme, what it comprised and the way it should be rolled out and then waited for the questions. There were none, in fact no-one said anything at all for the whole time I was there! I returned to West London with my tail between my legs and informed the rest of the project team that Finland would not be joining in.

Some months later I happened to be talking to someone who had recently returned from a trip to Finland where he had taken part in the annual yacht race, with competing teams comprising customers and ICL staff, taking place across the Baltic between Helsinki and Tallinn. He mentioned that whilst there he had been involved in, and had been impressed by, their launch of customer focus. It turned out that Finland had arranged a *quality revolution* where all members of staff were *hijacked*, literally thrown onto the back of open trucks, and driven to a village where there had been an actual revolution sometime during Finland's history. The launch had then taken place in conjunction with all of the villagers. He showed me photos of Timo dressed in peasant costume and addressing his people from the back of one of the trucks whilst issuing them with their customer focus kit. I should have mentioned earlier that this particular business had a set of products that were all badged with the brand something-wear. So there was TeamWear, ShareWear etc. and now, in support of customer focus there was CareWear. Yes, every member of staff was given a pack of condoms for each customer in case they were needed when their customers reached Tallinn!! They had not wanted to mention this to the guys from corporate because they expected, probably quite rightly, that we would disapprove and put a stop to it. But, the quality and customer focus deployment in Finland was the most successful, the most passionate and the most long-lived of any of the countries. But Timo was the only leader who **dared to do it his way**.

So, in my leadership philosophy there's **dare to be wrong, dare not to know, dare to be different** and **dare to do it your way**. And there's one more dare, the most important of them all – and that's **dare to dare, as you have a responsibility to dare!**

Whenever I have a day when things get on top of me or when I have one of my reverse Forrest Gump moments I draw inspiration from Nelson Mandela by re-reading a poem that he delivered as part of his inaugural speech on becoming Prime Minister of South Africa. He did not actually write these words, they were penned by Marianne Williamson, but he did incorporate these daring words into the speech he wrote whilst incarcerated in a cell in Robben Island. Some of you may know this poem, it's called Shine, but for those who don't:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.
We ask ourselves, "Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?"
Actually, who are you not to be?
You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world.
There is nothing enlightened about shrinking.
We are all meant to shine, as children do.
We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.
It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone.
And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.
As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

And the reason I'm sharing this poem is because, in my opinion, we have the best jobs in the world since our obligation is to change things and make them better than they were before. Our roles are the only ones, apart from that of our Managing Directors, where the scope is limitless and nothing is out of bounds – indeed where the improvement of everything is specifically included. It's also one where giving way to your passion is a pre-requisite and where inspiring passion in others is the most rewarding part.

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I know that you are brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous - powerful beyond measure – A class students. I just want you to truly believe this too so you can inspire those around you to be A class students and improve the performance of your organisations.

Thank you for listening to me today. It was harder speaking about my views on leadership than describing my six sigma deployment or project selection criteria but it was something that I really wanted to do and I **dared to dare**. It was my own version of one buttock playing - thank you for letting me.

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