

Leadership Insights

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The Leadership Metronome

by

Dr Norman Chorn

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While listening to some music recently, I was reminded of my time as a young boy learning to play the piano. I was a poor music student – my enduring memory is of the metronome beating out its relentless rhythm while I was playing under the watchful eye of my music teacher. The metronome became the symbol of everything from which I wanted to break free. It seemed as if my wilful spirit wanted to set its own tempo, rather than moulding my tempo to someone else's rhythm.

It occurs to me now that the metronome may be a useful metaphor for leadership in modern organisations. The tempo, discipline and two-way swing of the pendulum are symbolic of the many challenges we seek to master in the art and science of leadership. As we think about this, four key insights emerge that prove useful guides in developing the skills of effective leadership.

Tempo

This refers to the pace or rhythm that we adopt when we go about our work. Each of us has a natural tempo at which we feel most comfortable working. It's easy to recognise when we are out of "synch" with someone else – we complain that they are either too slow or that they don't give us enough time to think. In reality, this is a big factor in relationship difficulties, when the speed at which one party operates is slower or faster than the other.

But your leadership tempo can be shifted, much like the metronome can be adjusted to operate more slowly or quickly. There may be days when you intentionally slow down your metronome, because that is the reality of your situation or the needs of the people around you. Other times, you may have to play at a quicker tempo to inject a sense of urgency into the situation.

So, our timing and speed should be a deliberate part of our leadership in different situations. If we cannot synchronise our tempo with the needs

of the situation and the people around us, we will not engage effectively as leaders.

Discipline

In music, the metronome plays an important role in ensuring that the musician maintains a steady tempo. This discipline is critical to creating order through the piece.

In leadership, this discipline relates to the order and control you exercise over your own life. There is the need to set realistic but stretching goals, and then follow them through. Leaders have to find a comfortable and productive rhythm in their lives and have the discipline to adhere to this as far as possible. This relates primarily to the areas of exercise / time out, self development and family time.

High performing leaders could consider themselves as racehorses. As we know, racehorses perform best with a strict regime of exercise, training and rest. Adhering to this regime is critical if we want to these animals to perform at their best.

To some, this may seem somewhat indulgent and even selfish, particularly when one considers the many demands on a leader's time. I have learned to come to terms with these accusations, because I know that my ability to deliver most effectively as a leader, friend and family member depends on my personal well-being and fitness. As they say on board aircraft, *"fit your own oxygen mask before helping those around you"*.

So, take the time to exercise, do the things you love and develop new skills. The discipline you exercise in this will serve you well in your role as effective leader.

Amplitude

Amplitude measures the degree to which a pendulum swings away from the vertical. In a properly functioning metronome (or pendulum clock), the amplitude of the left-hand swing is equal to that of the right-hand swing. This is an important property, ensuring that the pendulum maintains a steady tempo.

Effective leadership has an analogous property – that between declaration and demonstration. Effective leaders have to declare and communicate their vision in a compelling manner and then demonstrate this by way of action and personal example. Both are important – without one or the other we cannot have appropriate tempo or discipline.

In simple terms, we might say that an effective leader has to do what they say – they have to display integrity. While personal integrity is vital, there is more to it.

If we consider that a key role of leadership is to create meaning and provide a sense of clarity, then we recognise that people need to see the actions and to hear the explanation and rationale for the actions. This produces a more complete understanding of the message. We know that some of the most effective change agents in our society back up their advocacy with service delivery to demonstrate the change. The work of Fred Hollows is a good example – he combined his advocacy for ocular health with field clinics where he delivered sight-saving eye operations.

Effective leaders cannot rely solely on powerful oratory skills or exemplar behaviour. They need both in equal amplitude to ensure the effective tempo and discipline of leadership.

Synchronisation

Watch the short (1½ minutes) YouTube clip below:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1TMZASCR-I>



In it, you see an experiment in which there is an attempt synchronise five metronomes so that their tempos match. It is an almost impossible task. But when the five metronomes are coupled by placing them on a movable platform, they are able to “communicate” with each other by transferring their force in line with Newton’s third law of motion – ie *for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction*.

By coupling the five metronomes (placing them alongside each other on the movable platform), each metronome is able to “push” the others

slightly, and the entire system seeks an energetically optimal point (watch the clip!). The metronomes have been configured into a form of “self-organising system”. And the key to this self organisation is the coupling of the individual metronomes.

The key insight for leadership is the ability to facilitate this coupling and open communication between different elements in the system. Leaders play two important roles in this regard.

The first is to ensure that they interact regularly and openly with the members of their organisation. They need to be visible and accessible so that people are regularly exposed to their communications and actions. In this way, leaders “couple” with their people.

The second principle is that leaders should ensure open communication and interaction between members of the organisation. This is not to say that everyone needs to be regularly communicating and interacting with everyone else. In large and complex organisation this would cause inertia as all the individuals try to couple with every other individual. But the key units need to be coupled (at least at senior levels) and their integration ensured. In this way, leaders can simulate a self-organising system in their own organisation.

What does this all mean for leadership?

The metaphor of metronome suggests four key insights for effective leadership:

1. Manage your tempo deliberately to ensure that you are engaging appropriately with the situation and the people around you. At times you may need to speed up in order to inject some urgency into the situation. At other times you may need to slow down to account for the needs of others
2. Exercise discipline in the way you go about your own life. Treat yourself like a racehorse and create a regime that allows you to operate at your peak. Remember that you will be of little use to others unless you are functioning effectively

3. The amplitude of your communication should be matched with that of your action. Integrity is an important leadership attribute (particularly in Australia), and it is the best approach to leading change in an organisation
4. Creating a synchronised organisation requires two important initiatives. Leaders have to engage openly and remain accessible to people in their organisation. They also have to facilitate open communication and coupling between key parts of the organisation to allow the development of a self-organising system.

Enjoy the music you create!

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