THE FOUR JOURNEYS OF THE LEADER

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'A leader is a person who has an unusual degree of power to project onto other people his or her shadow or his or her light... A leader is a person who must take special responsibility for what is going on inside him or herself lest the act of leadership create more harm than good'.

Parker. J. Palmer.

This way of thinking about leadership places emphasis on reflectiveness, understanding the self and the 'being' of the leader as a complement to skills and 'techniques' for the 'doing' of leadership. A helpful framework for holding the two together is the idea that each one of us is on four journeys through our lives and that people with responsibility for leadership need to be particularly aware of each journey and the work of keeping them in balance.

The underlying journey is the journey of the self – what unfolds, the events through which we insert ourselves into the world; where we are born, grow up, study, work, the people with whom we live in childhood and adulthood. Reflecting on the journey of the self helps each of us to hear our own story, to see things differently from the way they seemed at the time – to understand more of the experience and see what we have learned. The particular responsibility for leaders is to deepen their understanding of their own strengths and vulnerabilities and to become more aware of the stories of those they lead.

An important element in the journey of the self is our 'capability' as it unfolds over time. Capability is how we use our judgement when we do not and cannot know what to do. The prerequisite for sound judgement is being able to 'get one's head around' the complexities and volatilities of the challenge. A match between capability and challenge gives the individual a sense of being 'in flow' – confident, competent, enthusiastic. The organisation gains the power of robust and resilient decisions.

Research has shown that capability grows over time. As individuals we all do our best to 'go with the grain' of that growth, to find challenges that stretch but do not over or underwhelm us, are just right for us at each stage of our growth. A leader is responsible for combining and pacing those individual patterns of growth for the good of the organisation as a whole.

A leader also has a special responsibility to reflect on the growth of his or her capability because it is the key element in readiness for the complexities and uncertainties of his or her leadership role. The role may have come a little too early, or perhaps he or she has been waiting for it for a while and finds disillusion creeping in.

Our research suggests that if a leader is not 'in flow' he or she, like anybody else, will not be able to make sense of the ambiguities, interconnections and unpredictabilities of his or her role, so will struggle to make robust decisions. And – and this is the leadership element – he or she will be far less able to provide the conditions in which others can use their judgement wisely and sustain the resilience of the organisation. Capability as the necessary but not sufficient condition for effective leadership is of the essence in volatile, complex conditions.

The second journey is the public journey at work in which our capability is expressed and affirmed – or not. It is in this journey that leadership is expressed and the responsibilities clear. In times of rapid change this journey makes heavy demands on everyone. Leaders often find that the demands on time, responsiveness and presence can overwhelm to the point where this journey can seem as if it is the only one. It is in precisely those circumstances that leaders need to be mindful of the importance of the other three journeys for themselves and for those they lead.

Everyone will have experiences of being over or under stretched by the challenges of their roles and the effect on their feelings and their decision-making. A leader may have considerable experience early in his or her working life of longing for more challenge, for more complexities and interconnections to navigate his or her way through. Some people faced with this become impatient and try to rush changes; others seek ways to offer their capacity to see a wider and more nuanced picture in support of those with whom they work.

The balance between the public journey and the journey of the self is the experience of being in or out of 'flow'. For the leader it is that experience for him or herself and the responsibility to provide conditions for others to be 'in flow'.

The private journey is shared with family, friends, and a community and in it we are very close to others' journeys. In many marriages and partnerships both have public journeys with all that means for expressing and affirming capability, for pressure on time, for managing two careers – and a household. And it seems often to happen that one partner may take on a more senior leadership role around the time when adolescent children need more time and understanding. Or when parents become frail and require more care.

There has been a significant change in the nature of this journey in recent years that affects everyone. For many years it has been common for one partner to have a 'more important' public journey – a leadership role – and the other to see their role as in part providing support for it. So the first partner would not have been expected to buy milk on the way home, make the supper or put children to bed. For leaders this adds to the expectations on them – and to the depth of their relationships with their children – and requires an additional understanding of the balancing of journeys of the people they lead.

The private journey is our 'habitat' – all that belongs to the place we leave and return to as we set out on our public journey. Pressure on this journey comes from a demanding public journey, from growth in capability, which is not appreciated by those we work with, from knowing we are 'out of our depth' but have not yet been able to acknowledge it. And it is easy to feel burdened by and/or a burden to those with whom we share this journey – it can seem as if there is no place in our life where nothing is expected of us. When we feel guilty about neglecting the private journey we often retreat from it rather than trying to weave it into the other journeys. There may still be a sense that this is acceptable for leaders and to an extent that has to be true. But even if the leader and his or her partner make that choice, many of those led will either choose not to or will not be able to. The leader has to carry the responsibility for resourcing, carrying projects forward meeting emergency demands while being understanding and patient about 'life style choices'.

A way of reflecting on the balance between the private and public journeys is to pause and learn from where one has chosen not to be.

The fourth journey is **personal** it is the journey through which we do or do not care for ourselves and weave together the other journeys. It is about finding the 'grain' of the self and learning how to go with it. This journey may be expressed in running, listening to music, making models, cooking, orienteering, sailing. The essence is time and space for ourselves and for reflection – this may be momentary or more focused. Some people are not aware of and give very little time or attention to their personal journeys until they face a crisis. As someone put it, this is the journey to ensure that your self does not disappear.

The personal journey puts us in touch with our inner resources – the judgement that allows us to make a wise decision when we do not and cannot know what to do. It may do that fleetingly or we may choose to become more aware of that 'answering activity' that 'knowing that can see forwards and backwards and in a flash give form to the confusions and chaos of everyday living.'

For a leader this journey is a 'duty of care' – for the light and shadows of the self and thus for others. The key work for a leaders' personal journey is developing and deepening reflectiveness – pausing to consider the way s/he approaches things, thinking about the way he or she thinks.

The personal journey supports the underlying journey of the self by helping us to free ourselves from the idea that our conscious thoughts and endeavors are all there is; it helps us to be in touch with, to trust and to hand over to our inner resources. This comes more easily when we are 'in flow'; when we are either under or overwhelmed by challenges become estranged from those inner resources. It is a particular responsibility of the leader in volatile, turbulent circumstances to stay in touch with inner resource as the core of sound judgement essential for his or her public journey.

Each of us seeks to be 'in flow' for the well-being it brings (not least in physical health). A leader must be honest with him or herself about being in or out of 'flow' for the well-being of the people led and the organisation as a whole.