



Leadership and moral neutralisation

“You see, their morals, their code, it's a bad joke. Dropped at the first sign of trouble. They're only as good as the world allows them to be ... I'll show you. When the chips are down, these... these civilized people, they'll eat each other.”

The Joker

Why the hell do I only ever see all this airy-fairy talk about leaders and leadership on LinkedIn? Why is it that people only ever post prophetic, motivational and lists of good leader attributes? There are some good leaders out there, but this is not true for everyone. Not all leaders should be leaders. Some leaders are hell-on-wheels for employees and employers. I'm writing this article to tell you about those 'other' leaders who we don't get to discuss or learn from on LinkedIn. If we all know that not all leaders are good leaders, then this starts the discussion to help those businesses find the right leader for their fruitful purposes. I'll tell you how to spot a defective leader, however I'm sure you have had your own experiences in bad leadership. Maybe this might be a nice reflection for you.

All of us are experienced in business one way or another. Within business come the social experiences and relationships we conduct ourselves and engage in, either by choice or not. In all aspects of business, we see the problems of these relationships and engagements with others that cause social unrest in the workplace. This social unrest can be minimal or extreme, especially if it were concerning the leadership of an organisation. This raises the questions that are explored in many articles on LinkedIn, speaking prophetically with definition on the greatness and optimism of leaders we either appreciate, strive or encompass in our lives. However, this could also be a cry for help in expectations, anger and resentment in the experiences we have had with leaders in our own lives. In this article, I

will attempt to define those leaders we do not wish for and their moral neutralisation techniques interconnected with the organisations that they work for. It brings the question to surface, what morals does your leader have in your organisation? Are they their own morals or is it all an act?

We understand that leadership can come in different forms of discourses, roles and strategies, depending on the uncertainty and the context of the organisation. So what discourse is your leader? According to Western (2008), a '**controller**' could be one who focuses on efficiency as a technocrat leader, who uses reward and deprivation in a system of coercive and utilitarian control. The workforce productivity is driven by threat through class power relations the leader has. A '**therapist**' reflects the 'wider social trends of atomization, self-concern, and the post-war individualistic expectations of being fulfilled, successful and happy' (2008, p.12). This is all about personal growth and self-actualisation in the workplace, bringing achievement, meaning and identity. A '**messiah**' provides 'charismatic leadership and vision in the face of turbulent and uncertain environment' (2008, p. 13), and appeals to the individual and society, promising salvation, culture, self and peer control. The '**eco-leader**' recognises that 'within an organisation there are dependent parts which make up a whole' (2008, p. 19). They take ethics beyond business ethics, into social concerns, beyond human concerns and realise a responsibility to the natural world. They understand that solutions in one area of business may create problems in another and social consequences, including short and long term consequences that may damage the business and the environment. The '**spiritual**' leader acts with spirit. They support the joy, positive life and the underlying ethics in a holistic approach. This is a discourse between the 'therapist' and the 'eco-leader'. Of course, there are other forms of leadership discourses out there. What leadership discourses have you experienced?

Kvalnes (2014) defines a leader's character and circumstances quite clearly for those who engage in moral neutralisation. The concept of moral neutralisation comes from criminology and juvenile delinquency studies, originally defined as a way to find reason in offenders convincing themselves to justify their criminal actions. Not that they rejected the values or moral norms of society, instead they use techniques to neutralise the belief that it would be wrong. Moral neutralisation is rife throughout the world of business. Some of us are aware and some of us are blind. Kvalnes (2014) identifies leaders of moral neutralisation conduct are leaders 'whose characters are defective' (2014, p.457). A leader who engages in moral neutralisation techniques is a person who 'should not have been trusted with the moral responsibilities that come with leadership, since the necessary personal moral qualities were not in place' (2014, p. 457).

On the contrary, an authentic leader is someone who should be identified and recruited as leadership research suggests. They have 'robust character traits, who are guided by an internalised moral perspective rather than being driven by external pressures' (2014, p. 457). The authentic person goes back to Aristotle who talks about virtue and Eudaimonia, as a 'state of happiness where the person acts and lives in accordance with who he really is' (2014, p. 458). The differences of full virtue and less define how truthful one is automatically to be in their authentic nature of leadership, enabling them to stand up to external pressure.

So what are these categories of techniques used by moral neutralisation offenders I hear you say?

1. Denial of responsibility.

This is where one or more of the conditions for responsible agency are not met. This is effected by forces beyond their control. In business, the 'technique can take the expression of the person presenting him/herself as a pawn on a checker board, moved around by top management or the dynamics of the competitive environment' (2014, p.461). It is a matter of survival for them, there is no real choice and they are acting out of necessity rather than free will or personal control.

2. Denial of injury.

The leader aims to minimise or deny any harm was/is done. The appeal to a larger picture and an act in question and the consequences are minor and soon forgotten. Even if these actions are spread among a large number of people, no individual can claim the act would have made a notable difference even if the agent had refrained from acting (Kvalnes, 2014).

3. Denial of victim.

The leader may acknowledge their actions could have a negative impact, however they claim the injured does not deserve moral protection. 'Those affected have only themselves to blame' (2014, p. 462). They would say it was them who started it, likewise they engage in similar conduct themselves or would do the same if in that position. Some employees may take this action in defiance against the employer to restore justice.

4. Condemnation of the condemners.

The leader accuses critics of misunderstanding the dynamics of the social practice they are engaged in. They raise doubts about their motives for expressing moral criticism. Moral concerns are deflected back on critics and they have a 'dubious ideological or moral agenda' (2014, p. 462).

5. Appeal to higher loyalties.

The leader denies their act was in self-interest, instead to honour some type of important moral obligation. In business, typically this is the 'loyalties to one's company, colleagues, employer, employees or stakeholders'. This is deemed more important than honesty, fairness or other moral values.

Kvalnes' (2014) research into moral neutralisation identified that business leaders utilised each and every one of these techniques listed above. There are ways to respond to extinguishing these and promote and uphold a healthy business/work environment. However, these neutralisation techniques identify 'leader's conduct is more strongly affected by circumstances than character' (2014, p.468).

Leaders who are defective in character should have never been given the moral and managerial responsibilities that leadership entails in the first place. However, leadership doesn't stop there. Just by looking back on an extremely famous book in 1937 called, '*How to Win Friends and Influence People*', it explicitly suggests that 'even in such technical lines as engineering, about 15% is of one's technical knowledge and about 85% is due to skill in human engineering – to personality and the ability to lead people' (Carnegie, 2016, p. 12).

So this makes you think about what moral neutralisation and what Carnegie (2016) can do for your business if you are a business owner.

Leaders have styles and strategies that deepen this inquiry, or at least we hope they have styles and strategies. Leaders affect trust and power in many ways that extend from their leadership in any organisation. It is easy to imagine through the defective leaders and leadership discourses how trust and power can implicate the messy relationships of an organisation. We can all wish for every leader to be infected with a 'Tony-Robbins-ism Syndrome' in how they lead an organisation. Tony Robbins describes his vision of leadership as being a servant. He describes being a servant as serving a group of people and meeting their needs. Tony Robbins also describes leaders who 'think they're going to lead by demand or position, can only lead for a short period of time' (Addicted2SuccessTV, 2011). To be this leader as Tony Robbins describes is about the needs of growing and giving. However, this wonderful world of leadership he describes is not a reality for many. It is so important for every organisation to be active in alleviating the criminal efforts of moral neutralisation in their leaders. Another implication to leadership is that if the owner themselves are defective leaders that filters their personal characteristics and methods of business onto those employed, then employees will choose to sell their soul to the devil and join those who win at any cost and keep on acting. There must be a way to fight moral neutralisation, just ask the Joker in *Batman: The Dark Knight* (2008).

What is the solution for these defective leaders?

How do you spot moral neutralisation techniques in a defective leader?

How do leaders need to be, rather than what they need to be?

This will be in my next article.

Enjoy.

Author: Michael Charles Fransen Cresswell B.Ed M.Ed, © Australian national basketball champion.

References

Aaronwty (2008) 'The Joker's Namecard' [online] www.deviantart.com (Accessed 11 September 2016).

Addicted2SuccessTV (2011) 'Anthony Robbins – Leadership – Becoming the Leader'. [online] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6C647EmV_o (Accessed 14 September 2016).

Carnegie, D. (2016) 'How to Win Friends and Influence People', (1eds, 1937), iBooks App Store edition [online], Washington DC Publishing, USA.

Kvalnes, Ø. (2014) 'Leadership and moral neutralisation', *Leadership*, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 456 – 470, Sage Publications, Norway.

Western, S. (2008) 'An overview of the leadership discourses', in Preedy, M., Bennett, N. and Wise, C. (1st ed), (2012) *Educational Leadership. Context, Strategy and Collaboration*, Sage Publications, UK.