'It Is What we are Here for – A Once In A Lifetime Chance': A tale of inspirational leadership

Fiona Kerr

School of Business, Adelaide University, Adelaide, Australia

Email:Fiona.kerr@adelaide.edu.au

'It Is What We are Here For – A Once In A Lifetime Chance': A Tale of Inspirational Leadership

Fiona Kerr

School of Business, Adelaide University, Adelaide, Australia

Email:Fiona.kerr@adelaide.edu.au

'It Is What we are Here for – A Once In A Lifetime Chance': A tale of Inspirational Leadership

ABSTRACT

Systems intelligence leadership theory highlights human potential and points out that everyone deals regularly with uncertainty, engaging constantly with life's situations without having all of the information available, knowing what the outcome will be, or being able to control the variables. Thus we act within (complex) systems constantly, and are remarkably successful at it. This is an immense, powerful source of leverage for leaders in building momentum and excitement to take on unknown challenges.

The paper briefly outlines six major qualities of inspirational leadership with reference to system s intelligence and relevant neurological response bases of leaders and staff. It illustrates these conceptual theories with a highly successful business case in which the leader naturally displayed such qualities.

Keywords:

Systems intelligence, stewardship, emergence, trust, change, charismatic leadership

This paper is not a definitive study that explores the conceptual aspects of systems intelligent leadership and the neurological response basis of effective leadership, but a case study that examines / highlights the implementation of such a conceptual framework in the field as a step towards theory making and the development of a theoretical framework. Such a study describes the operationalisation of the systems intelligence paradigm, and the identification of a number of factors affecting inspirational leadership. The managerial and organisational implications of the research are compelling and invite further research in this nascent field.

The paper denotes how systems intelligence can be represented and modelled utilizing a semi-structured interview technique to draw out inherent system dynamics and apply them to empirical case study data to elucidate the inherent behavioural and systems issues involved in the operational practice of leading a complex human system. (Sharif and Irani, 2006:930)

THE MOTIVATION

This paper was inspired by a chance encounter and enthralling conversation with a well known public figure, about an achievement that has taken place largely out of the public's sight. This led to an interview sitting on a balcony overlooking Pink Bay at the tip of Kangaroo Island, where a story unfolded of a person tasked with the *impossible* who was totally committed to achieving it. As the new head of the company, he impassioned the staff to not only meet the challenge, but go far beyond what

everyone thought was attainable. His passion and *gut instinct* illustrated a natural capability for wise leadership and the use of *emergent logic* – an intuitive understanding of dealing with people and organisations as complex beings. Some salient quotes from his narrative illustrate key aspects of travelling the emergent path, and leading people somewhere they have never been before.

THE EMERGENT PATH

The path of progress in the change process obeys many of the rules of complexity – the outcome is often not known until the end or latter part of the journey as it emerges from ongoing interaction and experimentation. Thus letting people explore possibilities and engaging *good radar* allows leaders to pay attention to what is working, and to tend and support these things while minimising activities that detract from the shared vision. Further, most situations are managed in real time, often without certainty of outcome or success, so envisioning and passionate commitment become critical to maintaining momentum.

Sometimes this momentum can grow almost exponentially until outcomes far exceed all expectations. The leadership capabilities listed above are key enablers for this, augmented by their use of *emergent logic* – an almost intuitive understanding of leading an enterprise as a *complex human system* which is *messy*, and in which leadership operates largely through communication, connectivity and credibility.

There is a growing body of research concerning what amounts to new era of management science giving valuable insights into how *complex human systems* work, along with tools that describe the functioning of complex phenomena, and their leverage and intervention points. With growing awareness that the future is *unknowable* and thus cannot be planned for or controlled in a linear fashion; areas such as foresight, sense-making and wicked problem solving are contributing significantly.

Many of these concepts, however vital to good leadership, tend to concentrate on how to stop or fix issues, and address the negative effects of common system archetypes such as 'fixes that fail'; 'the tragedy of the commons' and 'shifting the burden to the Intervener'(Meadows 2008:116-141). While

these concepts are invaluable and powerful in terms of where to *intervene,* there is less investigation into what happens in organisations or situations that leap forward, where momentum builds and the excitement factor remains even when there is doubt and fear around stepping into the unknown.

Positive approaches such as systems intelligence highlight human potential, and point out that all of us engage constantly with life's situations without having all of the information available, without knowing what the outcome will be, and without being able to control most of the variables. Thus we act within (complex) systems constantly, and are generally successful at it through *microbehaviours* that positively influence the situation (or system). Hamalainen & Saarinen (2007) even suggest positive archetypes that should replace the normal systems thinking ones - such as *fixes that fly* instead of *fixes that fail*; not the *tragedy* but the *miracle of the commons*, or *sharing* rather than *shifting the burden.* This would reframe and accentuate this consistently untapped capability.

Understanding and tuning their *radar* into these small actions is an immense and powerful source of leverage for leaders in building momentum and excitement to take on unknown challenges. It allows them to 'listen to the wisdom of the system' (Meadows 2008:178) and to sense the undercurrents of the environment through 'human connectivity'. Wise leaders use a combination of analysis and intuition, trusting their cognitive instinct. We all use these capabilities, but leaders who trust in their *gut* are comfortable with the fact that they are immersed in an unfolding, emergent situation and understand the importance of the human, experiential, emotional and subjective aspects of an organisation. (Hamalainen & Saarinen 2007).

Human connectivity is taking fascinating turns, with work on the *social brain* revealing insights such as the level of 'hitherto undreamed of neural duet between brains as people interact' (Hamalainen & Saarinen 2007:12). Some work points to the possibility that people adopt not only the ideas and terminology of strong, charismatic leaders, but that when there is a high level of connectivity between them, both lay down new neural nets which are almost identical when working together. Thus what seems like a shared idea or method can almost be seen as a *shared brain*. Further, neurons have been isolated in the brain which orchestrate or mirror physical behaviour, and influence trust, empathy,

humour and intuition through fast intuitive assessment of complex social situations (Goleman 2006),(Allman, Karli, Watson, Tetreault, Atiya 2005).

As this paper does not allow me to articulate and explore all of the qualities that play a part in leading an initiative 'to 'glory' (Interviewee, 2010), I have chosen to focus on six of the most important qualities that, in my experience, are key to inspirational leadership.

LEADERSHIP QUALITIES

Passion and Commitment

'I think the main thing was desire and sheer will, and experience to trust my gut instinct'
'The money comes and goes, profit gets absorbed, but the glory lasts forever, -the opportunity to achieve something that no one else has ever done is fantastic and whoever gets that opportunity. These moments come around once in a lifetime -It's what we're here for, not just to fill a working day but to achieve things, and that was exciting'.

'Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it'

(Goethe).

Leaders who are passionate about their belief in what is possible can effect huge change in the perception and core beliefs of others. Their positive enthusiasm almost *pulls* their people out of a safe, conservative position into the '*space of possibilities'* (Mitleton-Kelly 2008, 2003:14-19), building sufficient respect, hope and trust to allow exploration of new ways to achieve the possibilities being vividly painted. Systems Intelligence describes it as *realistic, hands on optimism* which is key to positively reframing these core beliefs, and points out that people often adopt 'holding back behaviours and systems that trivialise reciprocity and decrease vitality'.(Hämäläinen and Saarinen 2006:24)).

New research indicates that an impassioned leader has a critical impact for neurophysiological reasons as well due to the effect of both *mirror* and *oscillator* neurons. Mirror neurons represent the neural basis of a mechanism that creates a direct link between the sender of a message and its receiver. 'Thanks to this mechanism, actions done by other individuals become messages that are understood by an observer without any cognitive mediation' (Rizzolatti & Craighero 2004:15). In recent studies, it

was concluded that top leaders elicited laughter three times more often, and the resultant positive mood helps their people to both take in information and provide a nimble, creative response. Further, there is a subset of mirror neurons that pick up smiles and laughter, and are fired more when team bonding occurs. (Sala & Druskit 2006).

Oscillator neurons attune physical coordination by regulating how bodies move together in animals including humans. *Dynamic resonance* is the effect of these oscillator neurons in combination with a leader's upbeat mood. The effect is very powerful, but the caveat is that the upbeat mood must be appropriately synchronised to the mood around him, or he will be seen as insensitive. (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee 2001)

'Once you are in you are in – and there is nothing that will condemn a project quicker to failure than a tentative approach in my opinion. If you half do something you will fail- it is better not to do it as it is damaging, wasting people's time and deflecting them from what they should be doing. You don't achieve what you set out to do so that is a lose/lose. I just thought 'if you are going to do this thing then do it, and be committed, and see it through'.

When people feel that the leader is totally committed to achieving the outcome they will more certainly step into the breach along side, particularly when the goal has been clearly envisioned.

Envisioning and Reframing

'My job was to turn fear into excitement; an absolutely crazy plan into the idea of possibility. I guess just to celebrate those two little words 'what if' .

'The production time line was crazy that we were attempting. We needed to go make it in May, but it wouldn't be until mid November that we would have a one off chance landed into our laps of the most famous pop star in the country, a household name we wouldn't even know until then…They said it was impossible, but I said 'I would like you to think, and know, that we will be selling large volumes of this person in the three weeks leading up to Christmas, that is the goal, that is what we have to do.'

'I went to the sales department and said we are going to be shipping 200,000 of this album, more than double what you have ever done - trust me on this – its going to work'

*'Envisioning is about beginning with an end in mind. Create twice – once in the imagination and once in practice' (Covey 19*89).

Envisioning is about having a clear goal, a shared map, and deeply understood boundaries (Mitleton-Kelly 2008). Such leaders are clear about their strategy and skilled in 'simply expressed expectations' of purpose with enough information about the 'intended shape of the organization, what it hopes to accomplish and how it hopes to behave', and then trusting each person to work with, and interpret, those principles' (Wheatley 2006:pg129).

Describing new possibilities *reframes* what is possible, allowing exploration of the *adjacent possible-* 'the exploration of change one step away from what already exists' (Kaufmann 2000:22). This may sound slow, but once people have moved that step, another adjacent possible is accessible and people can move quickly from one to the next once they have faith, a clear goal and shared definition of achievement.

Tending and trusting

'None of it was hard. It was time consuming because once I had started this it was like being a ***chinese plate spinner*** *you get some started, and then you get them all started and then you had to go back and* ***check*** *on them again. It was* ***labour intensive*** *because it was blue sky and we had never been there before, you had to keep dipping in to make sure they felt* ***supported***, *they hadn't been sent off on a wild goose chase and no one was going to be there for them, so just* ***keeping a presence*** *there was the main thing. That was the biggest challenge - once you have set them on this track, making sure that you are there* ***side by side*** *with them'..*

Tending is about listening and watching, entering the process only when required. It is about *small interventions*, critical in calming anxiety about trying something new before it becomes an issue. Often people cannot articulate their reservations or *formalize* them in a meeting, so doorway chats allow tuning in to how people feel, as well as two way exchange which is mostly what is needed to keep people feeling safe and committed to the process.

'It was little things like jumping in just before lunch and grabbing the production manager, buying him a parma and a pint and asking how things were going? Or after work going down to the promo group and saying how is is going? It wasn't like formal meetings-it was using the other space and time and social systems that we have around work to Chivvy people on.'

Much of fostering positive behaviours is incremental; but can snowball as people change the way they see possibilities. Saarinen and Hamalainen call this the *domain of small actions that could have been* and see it as a huge leverage point for leaders to understand and work with. Tending is not about being an expert at task level or managing the present, but about asking questions when roadblocks arise and helping to work through the problem.

'I just had to ask the questions and wait for the answer and if it was negative -if they said 'no, this is going to be a problem, I would just say, okay, well, how do we get around it? That is all'.

Leaders need to both build trustworthiness and show trust. This entails honest communication, listening and fostering *high connectivity* wherever needed that may ignore formal hierarchical control patterns. Candour is a key factor in a healthy organisation and can only grow when it is perceived from others, so it is time consuming to instil. It is worth the effort, as a lack of candour 'blocks smart ideas, fast action, and good people contributing all the stuff they've got. It's a killer' (Welch 2005:25)

On an ongoing basis, a wise leader tasks in two ways which allows for reflection and stillness but couples this with action, in the form of daily application of skills to achieve outcomes. As leaders influence both idea generation and application, De Jong & Den Hentog (2007) describe their role as balancing the stimulation of innovation with the requirement of short term effective tasks to be completed. This allows a modicum of control in the unsure situation of doing something new.

'It wasn't all feel and gut, they had to have all of their ducks in a row , all of their facts and figures because that drives confidence in knowing that there is nothing more that you can do to make sure that it is going to work….there were big hugs, but there was a lot of 'okay, tell me where we are, how are

> *we doing, have we thought of this' so they had a big security blanket knowing that we were prepared ,*
>
> *like a military operation that we had never ever done before'..*

Radar

> *'You have to know your people, and when you start aligning your plans after the initial surprise and*
> *start getting into the 'what if possibilities' you can gather who are going to be the **early adopters** and*
> *who is just going along for a quiet life, scratching their heads and thinking this is ****'..*
>
> *'You have to feel (candour) with every individual. Some executives need and can handle the whole*
> *truth, others you can only give a little bit to at a time as it is pointless overburdening people who can't*
> *handle huge concepts. You have to be sensitive. And it wasn't a question of seniority -there were execs*
> *you just gave a portion of the plan to, and there were others at grass roots level that could handle and*
> *needed more where you knew that a lot more candour was going to bear fruit'.*

Radar is vital for a leader to be finely tuned to their people and organisation. A systems intelligence approach connects the two leadership areas of 'rationally controlling, engineering and commanding complex structures' with 'sensing, experiencing and sharing the subtleties of ones environment through human connectivity and the subjective dimension' (Saarinen & Hamalainen 2007:5).

Attuned, wise leaders use a combination of analysis and intuition, trusting their cognitive instinct. We all use these capabilities, but the leader who trusts in their gut is comfortable with the fact that they are immersed in an unfolding, emergent situation and they 'listen to the wisdom of the system' (Meadows 2008:p178) and understand the importance of the human, experiential, emotional and subjective aspects of an organisation.

The capability for finely tuned leaders to trust *gut instinct* is being born out by behavioural neuroscience examining the role of Von Economo Neurons (VENs), also known as spindle neurons, in intuition. These neurons are larger and have longer branches that may assist the 'ultrarapid connection of emotions, beliefs and judgements through neural networks triggered in one twentieth of a second regarding how we feel about that person', (Golman & Boyatzis 2008a:p77). VENs are 'associated with

positive and negative subjective feelings expressed by subjective ratings of facial trustworthiness, empathy, and the discrimination of the mental states of others, and are thought to have recently evolved to allow the rapid adjustment of behaviour in quickly changing, increasingly complex human social networks'.(Allman et al. 2005:p4)

Creating a 'flourishing' environment

> *'Once these guys were on the road, once the train had left the station they were committed to it, and far more imaginative and creative than ever I would be. …as a boss it was fantastic to see them going beyond the expectations, exceeding the passion the commitment and the imagination that I thought was possible, and that was exciting'.*
>
> *'The gold for me was sharing something with a group of human beings who had the opportunity to all go beyond their expectations and achieve, and that was glorious, absolutely fantastic, and even now still gives me a warm feeling in my belly'.*

'Most men are more capable of great actions than of good ones' (Montesquieu)

Creating a flourishing environment means focusing on what people are doing right. It is making 'risk taking' and the offering of *disconfirming information* not only safe but rewarded.

Microbehaviours affect how we behave, interact and communicate, and are key to creating a positive culture and maximising performance. Losada's work on high performing teams lists the three critical microbehaviours as acting positively, inquiring of others, and referring to teammates. Saarinen & Hamalainen use the term *flourishment* (2007) to describe what happens when the people involved in the system believe in its capacity to change and improve, and this becomes self-fulfilling. Thus a systems intelligent leader operates within the formal, task based system but manages the emotional system simultaneously (2007).

Due to human choice, it is a key area of leverage, and can be exponential in nature once beliefs or behaviours are changed. From a system generating conservatism and fear, an unsupportive system can become one of faith and optimism. The emergence of exceptional ideas and deeds can occur once it is

seen as safe to take a chance or offer information which challenges current practice but may potentially transform it.

Unknown future / outcome

*'They couldn't comprehend the time line or the capability to sell someone we had never even heard of' and I said 'we can, **trust** me on this, its going to work' …Its like trying to get them to imagine something that hasn't been invented yet, it's a real leap of faith for everyone, and massive credit to them, that they actually bought into the fun'.*

'I think life is a series of grand, or just poignant moments, and that is your story, that is your myth. Failures and successes equally define who you are, but you just have to be able to accept that – I was prepared for failure, but it didn't stop me. I just wanted to see what is possible'.

We carry out our life in real time, within environments, contexts and relationships that are changing and emerging as we are relating to them. We can only rely on precedent and experience to the extent that it informs us in a new, context specific situation. Great leaders such as Lincoln are said to have been able to 'act constructively and productively within an emerging whole as it unfolds' (Saarinen & Hamalainen 2007:pg3). He was capable of 'Cultivation and care, insight and intuition, effort and trial, emotional and social intelligence, sensitivity for other people and the possibilities and complexities of the moment, a sense for the most relevant factors, an ability to integrate conflicting forces and a fierce resolve towards a desired state of affairs'(Saarinen & Hamalainen 2007:pg3)

Using military battles as examples of an unknowable future, Artigiani (2005) reflects that they were most successful when rules of engagement were not imposed, but instead judgement delegated to individual generals to deal with the emerging situation. Nelson did this, and thus did not need to know everything in advance because his fleets 'arranged themselves as solutions to the problems their enemies posed'(Artigiani 2005:p13) through a common core of understanding among his captains.

These examples highlight the importance of a leader fostering shared intention and goal, grown through a high degree of connectivity and interaction between the people involved. It requires full and frank information flow, and the ability to act on the shared vision, ethically.

In turn such shared ethics and intention allow us to make value judgements when working in the unknown or unknowable space, and guide us through dealing with complex issues.

CONCLUSION

It is known that change will occur, but not what will happen, as multiple possibilities are available and new path selection occurs, shaped by history, the current state and the culture/environment. Organisations with a capacity to renew themselves are capable of enduring stability and change through trust, communication, clear strategic direction, safety and support.

If, however, they are led by someone with passion and commitment, the ability to reframe perceptions and encourage flourishment through good radar and the ongoing tending and trusting of all levels of people as required, then entities can truly transform.

'It sounds like faux heroic, but if you spend your life trying to achieve things - if you just follow the dollar it is a shabby, shabby approach to life but if you try and achieve things that are noble, worthy, fun, spectacular, if you go the glorious route that keeps you warm at night. The money comes and goes but the achievement -that is what I think drives me a lot of the time, trying to achieve and be part of things that have made a splash.' .

As a footnote, the sales director who said that we had only ever shipped 70-100,000in this country, and my target of 200,000 was impossible, went on to 350,000, almost double what we put down as a crazy idea, and it ended up as the fastest selling album in Australian history. Who doesn't want to be part of that, to put that on their CV, or tell the grandkids, and be able to say to each other "I was involved in Australian record making history"- who gets that chance – it's awesome!! .

References.

Allman JM, Watson KK, Tetreault NA & Hakeem AY (2005) Intuition and Autism: A Possible Role for Von Economo Neurons, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 9(8): 367-373

Artigiani R (2005) Leadership and Uncertainty: Complexity and the Lessons of History, *Futures* 37: 585–603

Covey S R (1989) *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Simon & Schuster, New York

De Jong J & Den Hargoh E (2004) *Measuring Innovative Work Behaviour,* Rotterdam University

Giacomo R & Craighero L (2004) The Mirror-Neuron System, *Annual revue, Neuroscience* 27:169–92

Goldman D & Boyatzis R (2008a) Social Intelligence and the Biology of Leadership, *Harvard Business Review* 86(9):p74-81

Goldman D & Boyatzis R (2008) Social Intelligence and the Biology of Leadership, *Growth 36(2)*: 52-54.

Goleman D, Boyatzis R & McKee A (2001) *Primal leadership: The Hidden Driver of Great Performance*, Harvard Business books,uk

Hamalainen RP & Saarinen E (2007) Systems Intelligent Leadership, in Hamalainin RP & Saarinen E (Eds). *Systems Intelligence in Leadership and Everyday Life*, Systems Analysis Laboratory, Helsinki University of Technology, Espoo.

Hamalainen RP & Saarinen E (2006) Systems intelligence: A key competence in human action and organizational life. Reflections: The SoL Journal 7(4):17–28

Kaufmann S (2000) *Investigations,* Oxford university Press

Losada M & Heaphy E (2004) The Role of Positivity and Connectivity in the Performance of Business Teams. *American Behavioural Scientist* 47: 740-765

Meadows DH (2008) *Thinking in Systems. A Primer,* Wright D (ed) Sustainability Institute.

Mitleton-Kelly E (2008) The Challenges of Leadership in the 21st Century: *Workshop at LSE*, July, 2008. www.lse.ac.uk/complexity.

Mitleton-Kelly E (2003) Complex systems and Evolutionary Perspectives on Organisations: The Application of Complexity Theory to Organisations. *Elsevier* ISBN:0-08-043957-8

Rizzolatti G & Craighero L (2004) The Mirror Neuron System. *Annual Review of Neuroscience* 27:169-92

Sala F & Druskat VU (2006) *Linking Emotional Intelligence and Performance at Work: Current Research Evidence with Individuals and Groups.* Google books.

Sharif A M & Irani Z (2006) Applying a Fuzzy-Morphological Approach to Complexity Within Management Decision making. *Management Decision* , 44 (7): 930-961

Wheatley MJ (2006) *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order In a Chaotic World* , 3rd edition, Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco

Welch J & Welch S (2005) *Winning,* Harper Collins.