Learning to love clarity

Wisdom Nuggets
From Organisation Dynamics

"Clarity carries a certain beauty & intellectual wisdom – which many of us miss in our unintended creation of confusion"

In our thirst to identify points of differentiation, build a sustainable business and create added value, many leaders and organisations have inadvertently initiated a love affair with complexity, which many argue, leads to inevitable confusion.

But is this a bad thing? Why is it, in a world that has become far more complex than it was just a generation ago, that the idea of complexity has become "bad" and simplicity is "good"?

After all, and let us be honest – when faced with a choice that allows you to get the things you and others want done, and perhaps even offers a bit more on top, we tend to choose the complex option almost all the time. Why else do you upgrade your i-gadget every 2-3 years?

Rather, when it comes to complexity we should be considering the desirable amount of complexity in the context of the level of innovation we need/want, the business models and strategies we follow and the capabilities of the organisation to understand and implement our ideas. We should be trying to find the right balance between the need to garner customer satisfaction *and* build a sustainable business.

So what's all this got to do with clarity? In our desire to find the right level of intricacy, I believe we have ignored the real joker in the discussion and one that often arises out of creating too much complexity – confusion. We do not like to be confused, puzzled, perplexed in the daily pursuit of our lives. It should be easy, self-explanatory and add value.

And this is where clarity, and the need for great leadership steps in. Complexity is ok in so far as it can be deconstructed to the core, and can be explained in easy to grasp bite size chunks that create immediate understanding and make things delightful.

Unfortunately, too many leaders and organisations are not able to handle the idea of clarity. They will make changes, issue edicts, evolve products and introduce new values and expectations without thinking all possible connotations through. Further, in parallel they will issue imprecise, unclear communication that causes more confusion and uncertainty than it resolves.

But is this the fault of the leader, or the failure of organisations to adequately guide leadership?

Clarity is not transparency

The challenge I believe is that too many leaders confuse clarity with transparency. Leaders who are transparent are arguably admirable and should be celebrated for their openness. But what is the point of transparency if the audience does not even *understand* what they hear, see, and read?

In contrast clarity helps us make sense of the fog of confusion. Clarity promotes the elimination of assumption and ambiguity about a situation. It brings certainty in terms of direction, vision and why we are even here. Working on clarity means a leader has mastered the capability to deconstruct complexity and provide necessary information in easier to describe, communicate and assimilate component parts.

This allows for priorities to be defined, set and checked and in doing so, give meaning to sometimes confusing and conflicting agendas. It generates a convergence of common understanding about what is expected.

Over time, clarity will help develop common mind-set, attitudes and cultures and will enhance the overall mood in the organisation and increase discretionary effort.

Further, clarity can energise and therefore should underpin change efforts – change in itself creates upheaval, which in turn can threaten business continuity. Processes, rules, people, teams and resources maybe in a state of flux, but judicious communication focussing on clarity can cut through uncertainty and ensure that people remain focussed during times of change.

Leadership competencies

So how do we get our leaders to fall in love with clarity? (Not out of love with complexity). Certainly one method pursued by many organisations is to be clear about the leader being recruited to the leading in the first place.

In this respect many organisations routinely create competency profiles and leadership frameworks that are supposed to represent the "ideal leader". Hidden behind a short list of core expectations will be a vastly detailed set of scaled behaviours and hidden descriptions that leaders are supposed to be able to master – every day.

But – is this sufficient, or does this action in itself create confusion? Well let us consider a couple of examples. Some off the shelf models such as the SHL Great Eight seem on the surface sensible enough – that is until you dive into the details and uncover that the list of 8, do in fact appear to be doubled. For example, "Supporting" is combined with "Cooperating" and "Interacting" with "Presenting" and so on. This prompts me to ask if this is a list of the "Great Eight" or do we dub them as the "Super 16"?

SHL's "Great Eight" Competencies	
Leading and Deciding	Takes control and exercises leadership. Initiates action, gives direction and takes responsibility.
Supporting and Co-operating	Supports others and shows respect and positive regard for them in social situations. Puts people first, working effectively with individuals and teams, clients and staff. Behaves consistently with clear personal values that complement those of the organisation.
Interacting and Presenting	Communicates and networks effectively. Successfully persuades and influences others. Relates to others in a confident and relaxed manner.
Analysing and Interpreting	Shows evidence of clear analytical thinking. Gets to the heart of complex problems and issues. Applies own expertise effectively. Quickly learns new technology. Communicates well in writing.
Creating and Conceptualising	Open to new ideas and experiences. Seeks out learning opportunities. Handles situations and problems with innovation and creativity. Thinks broadly and strategically. Supports and drives organisational change.
Organising and Executing	Plans ahead and works in a systematic and organised way. Follows directions and procedures. Focuses on customer satisfaction and delivers a quality service or product to the agreed standards.
Adapting and Coping	Adapts and responds well to change. Manages pressure effectively and copes with setbacks.
Enterprising and Performing	Focuses on results and achieving personal work objectives. Works best when work is related closely to results and the impact of personal efforts is obvious. Shows an understanding of business, commerce and finance. Seeks opportunities for self-development and career advancement.

In another example – the USDA published 28 core leadership competencies each broken down into 5 performance levels – that's 140 individual items that should be familiar territory for a leader. And in a recent HBR article (https://hbr.org/2016/03/the-most-important-leadership-competencies-according-to-leaders-around-the-world) 195 leaders across 15 countries & 30 organisations were asked to name the competencies they felt most important – even the leaders themselves, when confronted with a list of 74 characteristics, could only get this down to a core of 15 (!!). How many of us can realistically tackle 15 core business objectives each year AND still succeed in each one?

My point? In our correct and admirable efforts to become better, smarter, faster, I begin to wonder if at times we have lost our ability to be focussed and pragmatic in supporting leadership activities. How many of you reading this can instantly recall, and *demonstrate*, all aspects of your organisational leadership competencies in your every day working life. Have you really learned to love them, and understand their value, or do you just pay them lip service?

Which do you prioritise? How do you balance the behavioural expectations outlined in these models with the need to achieve targets, tackle burning issues or earn your bonus? More specifically, does your team recognise your behaviour in these competencies? What is their perception of your reality? Are you leading as your employer expects?

Lets us be honest. Many line managers and business leaders are today initiative weary. They face on onslaught of expectations form a plethora of stakeholders, which leads to an inevitable concentration to deliver on quantitative success and push qualitative, hard to measure value and behavioural judgements onto the back burner. Most of us get rewarded for bringing in results – not being the perfect leader.

Where to start?

Assuming all this is true, why then does the achievement of clarity appear to be difficult to attain? The challenge for many leaders is that clarity in action is much more than just providing more explanation...it has to be lived and felt to be embedded and internalised. In other words, the pursuit of clarity needs to be loved and placed above all else.

 This means that the answers to three core questions should be defined:

Do we know & understand why we are here, where we are going & how we will get there?

Answering this should include all or some of:
- What are we here for?
- How do we add value & what is our point of differentiation?
- Why should customers be excited?
- What do we want to achieve and where have we come from?
- How will our stakeholders know when we are there?
- What (precisely) needs to be done & when do we realise our ambitions?
- Do we need a back up plan and what triggers its use?
- Who is accountable, what are the extents of authority and what are the milestones?
- Are our processes, people and resources sufficiently robust to get us there?
- Is there enough hunger in the organisation? Is our culture ready and able to support our direction?
- Are our assumptions about our business and people today still valid in the future?

Do we trust the person who is leading us?

Trust is the emotional glue that binds teams, individuals, leaders, processes and rules together. Clarity can build trust; but without trust, absolute clarity cannot be achieved. It is important to recognise that mere sharing of information (transparency) does not build trust.

Fact is, in an environment that is operating without trust, a team will continue to harbour background suspicions and assumptions that there are perhaps hidden agendas or motives on the part of the leader or the organisation – this can get in the way of team work and creation of total commitment and accountability.

In contrast, in an environment of trust we experience an alignment in behaviours, actions and words. This will enrich communication and enhance the relationship capital between a leader and their team, helping ensure that critical information is better shared. When we trust someone, we feel more comfortable to share our inner values, beliefs, ideas, hopes, efforts and concerns. Unveiling these sub-conscious areas will promote clarity.

Do we agree and are we committed?

Lencioni argues that even if teams have mastered an ability to disagree yet still commit, they rarely benefit from that commitment as they fail to achieve clarity around a decision they have made. Rather they will end up making well intended assumptions about what is needed to be done, and in doing that create confusion amongst other employees.

You will notice this commonly happening towards the end of the meeting when the leader summarises what they believed to be the agreed outputs – invariably writing these down will prompt a response from someone else in the room claiming that they had felt the outcome was a touch different. To avoid this, it is imperative that not only the details of agreements are outlined, but also the accountability and commitment to these is also defined.

If you are able to bring some sense to these questions, and critically analyse what you do, the chances are you are in a good place and on the way to creating great clarity. Remember, less really is often more, and great wisdom can come from simple things. Learn to love clarity!

Need help building clarity in your organisation?

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