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Getting traction with sound science:
Where is the tipping point?

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The tipping point seems to have been reached for many societies in the world's population concerning taking 'climate change' seriously. One interesting aspect of this is the interplay between science, politics, self-interest, perspective taking … and when 'information' and 'analysis' galvanise actual 'commitment' and hence 'action'. When does application of the scientific method – steeped as it is in necessary scepticism – convert to valued outcomes (Gerard Egan) on the basis of beliefs established by such rational enquiry and its conclusions?

It is worth reflecting on this from the vantage point of the similar journey of evidence-based scientific research about 'leadership'. For instance from the viewpoint of the Full Range (transformational – transactional – passive avoidant) Leadership Model research history pioneered over 25 to 30 years at the Gold Bar Standard[1] by distinguished Professors Bass and Avolio - and their many hundreds of international associates.

Some academics, understandably trained to be sceptical about ever accepting that any 'theory' has 'arrived', may continue to dismiss this voluminous research base and strive to start again looking at leadership "as if" nothing much had really been established. Similarly, the popular contemporary consumer market for leadership assessment "tools" is replete with hundreds if not thousands of such attempts. Often these are merely "somebody's good idea". Others have some research evidence behind them to suggest they should be taken seriously. Others again are "believed in" because so much money and energy has been poured into their development, as maybe the case with many organisationally developed leadership competencies. (But is this not merely following a 'cloning methodology': "let us make them in our own image" - regardless of the outcomes?).

> **When does application of the scientific method – steeped as it is in necessary scepticism – convert to valued outcomes on the basis of beliefs established by such rational enquiry and its conclusions?**

There is much evidence still that organisation and government consumers alike spend $millions on un-proven leadership tools and competencies without checking either their robustness or their outcomes for individuals, groups and organisations. "If it looks good, feels good, others have used it, and I trust the consultant then why not commit and act?" The tipping point for the modification of such approaches and belief sets is approaching – and for an increasing number it has already arrived.

Both the debate about 'climate change' and the debate about 'leadership' have some aspects in common. Just what weight can, should, and will be put on scientific evidence, rational analysis and

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the conclusions of careful scientific procedures before commitment is made and action undertaken? Put another way – such debates are about what counts as 'authoritative' for people and societies. They impinge on the realms of philosophy and ethics … as well as organisational politics.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) convened by the United Nations' has recently reported 'unequivocal' evidence that the world was getting hotter and that it was 90% likely that this has been caused by the human societies on this planet. All of a sudden, amidst the enormous complexities of ecological and climate modelling, a scientific community of some 2,500 scientists world-wide, sponsored by governments - not by 'for profit' corporations, has reached a consensus about probability ("likely") and causation (not just merely 'association' or 'linkage'). This phenomenon is the fulcrum for a tipping point that acts to cause people to change their personal and social belief systems. People now look at and interpret weather patterns against such scenarios and consider how it might affect them long term. Such interplay between sound science, self-interest, politics and wider perspective-taking is starting to lead to concern, to commitment and to action in many quarters.

But how to harness this new energy and momentum for change? Effective change-oriented 'leadership' is essential – not merely an option. Everybody has a theory or belief of some kind about what constitutes such 'good leadership'. But some beliefs and understandings of 'leadership' are better than others! Not all are equal in value – despite what post-modernist thinkers might say. Probability, prediction, causation, effect-size really do matter. Every view is not 'as good as' any other view – even if well-argued: healthy scepticism has its limits. Noted researcher, practitioner and author Warren Bennis recently challenged: '… the 4 major threats to world stability are a nuclear/biological catastrophe, a world-wide pandemic, tribalism, and the leadership of human institutions. Without exemplary leadership, solving the problems stemming from the first 3 (sic.) threats will be impossible' (AJP 2006 Abstract: American Journal of Psychology, 61: 6).

So what constitutes 'exemplary leadership'? Optimal profiles within the Full Range Leadership Model (™ Bass and Avolio) are a very significant start. We could call them a vital part of if not the backbone of an integrated leadership theory as Robert House has

more than hinted. But they need supplementing of course by what we know of their relationship to personality (behaviours, cognitions, attributes), traits, groups, organisational behaviour, creativity, ethics, wisdom, context, situation, and what Professor Bruce Avolio terms the internal dispositions associated with effective leaders (AJP, 6:1).

The Accredited Network of MLQ Leadership Services has a vital part to play in developing the leadership capacity of, and within, organisations.

Given the extensive leadership research we now inherit, one thing that seems unarguable is transformational leadership is necessary for significant change to take place in people, groups, cultures and societies. Warren Bennis has suggested that effective and exemplary leadership is absolutely necessary today in organisations and societies if catastrophe is to be averted. But the nature of such leadership has to include advanced ethical consciousness (Elliott, 2003, 2005 and 2006).

The Accredited Network of MLQ Leadership Services has a vital part to play in developing the leadership capacity of, and within, organisations. That is, applying sound science to achieve desired optimal outcomes! The challenge is to move others through and beyond the 'leadership tipping point' … that engenders commitment and action about 'the how' and 'the what' of leadership! But here and about there are many signs of movement in this direction.

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¹ Top international, blind peer reviewed journals.

SELECT RELATED REFERENCES:

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