



A new paradigm calls for a new kind of leadership

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Abstract:

More than change it is a question of transformation. The libraries are in the throws of and must continue to live through paradigmatic changes which entail that in principle EVERYTHING has to be redefined. The transformation processes require leadership capacity that can embrace and lead a diverse simultaneity. As leaders we must learn to contain and lead simultaneous processes of strategy development, competence development, organisational changes, technology shifts, adaptation of premises, identity changes, re-branding, basis for financing etc. Rather than management we need comprehensive leadership development. I will present nine points, which I have come to value through my long-standing involvement in leadership.

The libraries in the throws of paradigmatic change

It is nothing new that the world's libraries are under pressure and in the midst of a wide-scale process of change. But to some people – and I am certainly one of them – the realisation of the sheer extent and complexity of those inevitable changes, is only now truly beginning to sink in.

The truth is that the word change is altogether too limited to fully describe the conditions the libraries find themselves subjected to – or are forced to move towards – if they are to survive as modern, strong knowledge and cultural institutions.

More than change it is a question of transformation. The libraries are in the throws of and must continue to live through paradigmatic changes which entail that in principle EVERYTHING has to be redefined. This applies to the basic suppositions about library, organisation culture, self-knowledge of the staff and roles as well as technology, management methods and leadership.

A change of paradigm brings about the need for a new discourse. We need a new vocabulary for the library, the kind of language that not only reflects the history, but opens up to the future ahead of us. And in the same way there is a need for examining which profession identities the libraries of the future will be calling for.

Development processes must lead to revolutionary rather than reformative results. Because the conditions for library activities are revolutionary. It requires radical strategic thinking – also in the actual development of new concepts in the individual areas of library service.

The development processes being of a radical nature, they can seldom be realised in the space of a year or two. On the other hand we don't have unlimited time in which to carry out our enterprises. So it is essential to maintain a suitably high 'pulse of change', while at the same time safeguarding environments and working methods that nurture the participants' sustainability and stoke the fires of passion.

How to lead these demanding processes of change?

The transformation processes require leadership capacity that can embrace and lead a diverse simultaneity. As a library leader one might perhaps prefer to arrange some calm and cosy development processes. I am afraid that I don't believe that to be enough. As leaders we must learn to contain and lead simultaneous processes of strategy development, competence development, organisational changes, technology shifts, adaptation of premises, identity changes, re-branding, basis for financing etc.

We need learning and nourishment along the way. Next I will present nine points, which I have come to value through my long-standing involvement in leadership.

Important points of leadership

1. From management to leadership

It may be very elementary, but it is also a crucial basic point of departure - to be aware of the movement from management to leadership. In mindset, in actions and in self-perception.

Management is a leadership concept from the past century, which is particularly applicable when you are planning and monitoring relatively predictable developments. The word 'management' comes from 'manege' (Danish for a circus ring) and the metaphor for the one in charge of the circus ring is a circus director who is right at the centre of events, brandishing his whip in order to make things happen.

Management is not the right answer to leadership in relation to clever, creative, innovative and confident knowledge employees, or to the complexity and unpredictability prevalent in our time. Leadership is a much broader concept under constant development. Every leader must work continually and deliberately on the development of his/her preferred, personal leadership.

2. Leadership groups are a substantial success factor

One person alone will seldom be able to fully assess the complexity of the present time. Leadership groups therefore play an important role in the leadership of modern organisations, and the work on developing these groups becomes a significant criterion for success.

In my work as leader I have begun with the leadership groups – or rather started in a new organisation by forming a leadership group with the potential and the desire for development and with a sense of loyalty – as one of several more basic values we have to share. Well-functioning and cooperating leadership groups are the epicentre for the first difficult steps, which also have to entail phasing out – and the guarantor of continued development – ever more radical, more advanced.

When the organisation is shaken by unforeseen events or is under pressure, for example from external players, everyone in the organisation looks to the leadership group. If the leadership group signals firm perspective, drive, self-confidence, faith in the future and also offers substance behind this attitude, then it brings strength and calmness to the organisation. If on the other hand the leadership group is divided among themselves and behave disloyally towards each other and towards joint decisions, the disharmony seeps through the organisation and creates an intolerable climate.

The crises, which my organisations have lived through with me in the role of senior leader, have for the most part ended happily, first and foremost due to the teamwork and loyalty of the leadership groups.

The leadership group must all the time have a keen awareness of the organisation and the world outside it. There is always something, which one as an individual does not see, but when in my leadership group we have one of our ‘mental field walks’ (inspired by Otto Sharmer¹), when we talk systematically about what is going on inside and outside the organisation, more perspectives are emerging. We discuss what each of us feels call for leadership in the organisation, and how we can tackle the different challenges which we have discovered.

A vital task for a leadership group in the innovating organisation is to make space and room for the tentative voices. They are the future. Without intervention they can so easily be drowned and crushed underfoot by the more dominant voices in the organisation – that is to say the basic assumptions, traditions, conventions. It is the responsibility of the leadership group to make sure that the subdued voices are heard and allowed space to grow stronger.

In Malmo we have started a competence and discourse development project, which amongst other things is meant to provide power to such tentative voices. The project is called ‘Løft blikket’ which can be translated to ‘Raise your sights’. Projected started ultimo 2010 and runs for three years.

3. We are putting down the tracks while the train is running

The legitimacy of the leadership group is a core issue, because it is essential that the organisation has faith in the leadership’s direction and prioritisations, even if all the answers cannot be provided beforehand. In the more predictable sequence of events of ‘yesteryear’ it

was possible to make more decisions in advance. Development leadership does not work like that.

We have an idea, a vision, an overall strategy and a feeling that something is going to happen, we are moving in a certain direction. But the unpredictability of our time makes it irrelevant to try to work out very detailed plans before we make the move. Rather, we have to go with the flow. We adjust the plans as we get wiser, and we find more answers along the way. We create meaning as we walk.

When we walk onto thin ice together, it is important to endure the uncertainty for a little while longer – not moving at once into ‘solution mode’ – we must try to *contain* the complexity not try to *reduce* it. And then we have to realise that unpleasant surprises are not the sign of bad preparation, but have to be regarded as new and useful knowledge.

In 2008 in Malmo we developed the strategy ‘The Darling Library in the World’. We launched it in 2009, and the plan was to implement it over a period of four years. Since then that time schedule has turned out to be far too optimistic, and the process more complicated than first assumed.

So – we have become wiser along the way, and we have acted upon this insight. We have decided to prolong the strategy period by a couple of years. This makes it possible to lower the speed of transformation, to spend more time on creating peace of mind and connectedness, to welcome more passengers onboard the train. More time also gives us a better chance to provide a suitable quality. Finally, we need more time for – with diligence and care – phasing out those parts of ‘the old library’, which are not to make the journey into the future.

4. Phasing out as highly prioritized as development

Radical development processes constitute as definite risk of loss of identity and meaning for members of staff who feel they are being disconnected from the processes. It is very understandable that it is hard for many people to let go of the love, pride and status which they associate with the old times. And as leaders we must remember to show respect and loyalty towards the old stories – the old history. We must endeavour to carry the old gold with us into our ‘new world’. Give people the chance to talk about old times, to indulge in memories. They should be allowed to talk about what really fuelled them in the past. About the battles they fought. And we must remember to offer them our sincere thanks.

The so-called narrative method is highly recommendable in processes where we have to say goodbye to the old times, in a decent way. At my previous workplace, NOTA, we went through a narrative process, and it did help a great deal when having to close down and put out the lights in an old department and take leave of a much-appreciated staff of long standing, in a dignified and thoughtful way.

5. Quite at ease on the brink of chaos

In libraries as modern knowledge organisations the well-educated, responsible, co-creative, bold and results-oriented employee is a much sought-after blessing. And creative relations among these employees and in their interaction with the world outside are extremely

important. Often they will be organised in projects or loosely coupled structures, and leadership in these connections has a lot to do with sparring and calibration along the way.

The common ground on which we have to stand – leaders as well as employees, is a question of values rather than rules. More a question of trust than control. More about creative competences and the ability to improvise than about routines and repetitions.

The leadership must assume the responsibility for such activities as may help to create a trusting, open and innovative environment of change. As for myself, I have good experiences with:

- arranging philosophical conversations
- orchestrating knowledge sharing processes
- development of common basic values in open inclusive processes
- loyalty and consideration on behalf of the leadership towards the old thoughts and procedures that we are not taking with us
- celebrating the successes together
- meditation, yoga, choir singing...

In the modern, safe organisation based on trust, leaders and staff can endure uncertainty and thrive in chaos, at least over periods of time. This is essential in major processes of change – which probably places us in a new ‘dimension’.

Armed with the necessary feeling of security, we must learn to move outside our comfort zone – right out to the edge where everything is new and where we undoubtedly feel like incompetent beginners. This can be an unpleasant challenge for many people. But we have to fully realise that trying and practising, making mistakes and forgiving ourselves and each other and learn from our experiences and carry on together, is one of the most important working methods of our time.

6. Leadership that advances innovation

Although we mostly move at a strategic level, it is quite clear that an organisation undergoing massive changes needs leaders who are able to function at all levels. Sometimes you have to provide practical assistance, other times one has to act as midwife to ideas so that they can be transformed into something real. You can be coach and sparring partner and at other times the library’s representative vis a vis the local authorities. The point is that as leader one must be able to flexibly alternate between levels and perspectives.

It applies to leaders as well as members of staff that we need people who can make things happen – not just talk about them. There might well be some filters in an organisation that are a hindrance to freely floating processes between the different levels in the organisation. One must be very aware of this and quickly intervene.

In our actual development processes at the city library I feel it is essential to create meeting places for dialogue between the ‘content of a task’ and myself as head of the organisation. It won’t be the case everywhere, but in Malmo I tend to have the role as culture bearer of the new strategy, and it is important for middle management, project managers and other creative forces to have access to my judgement in terms of qualitative and (dare I use the word) artistic dimensions. In that way I act a bit as an informal arbiter of taste, and I consider this to be an important link in supporting a high level of quality. Once again it is a question of

allowing the dawning voices to be heard and gain greater power of survival. One might say that I by-pass some of the filters in the organisation, and I do this because I perceive it to be necessary (knowing from within), and that the organisation's innovators and co-creators really appreciate it.

7. Organisational musicality

As our daily reality is characterized by unpredictability and complexity it gives a certain amount of security as well as pleasure to be involved in the development of intuition, improvisation and what one might call organisational musicality. Today we cannot rely on understanding everything rationally. And when, moreover, we also have the ambition to relate to that which is not yet a reality, but is emerging and which we must endeavour to infuse with vigour, linear thinking is no longer enough, and we must think in terms of more sensuous forms of leadership.

In a way one might say that modern leadership is moving away from being A BIG SENSIBLE HEAD almost without a body and becoming a sensuous many headed social being, where an equally manifold sentient body has recaptured its naturally big space so that the creature becomes more harmonious.

For many years the right half of the brain has been left behind in the wardrobe when arriving at one's rationally run place of work. Here the left half of the brain has had an absolute field day and dominated with hierarchies, structures, logic and definite plans. Today we need to activate the right half of the brain in equal measure, so that we can get into contact with feelings of vitality, presence, connectedness. We must possess these resources in order to be able to interpret and understand what is happening and create purpose and meaning. This is what leadership today is very much about.

Kenneth Gergen, professor of psychology and father of the concept 'social construction' talks about different forms of listening. He has introduced the concept: generative listening, which means that you listen with your whole body and soul, and that is a method you can teach yourself and which is necessary to be able to sense what kind of future is waiting to be grasped.

I have been involved in a so-called 'Artists in residence' project, whose purpose was to encourage generative listening. It was part of a long-term competence development process, where the participants together examined and reflected upon how to be inspired in our daily work to reach championship level by studying opera singers' productive interaction and reflect upon our observations together with a doctor and professor of philosophy – Ole Fogh Kirkeby. We since won the prize as Denmark's most innovative public institution in 2007.

8. Kura Sui

There is no such thing as a quick fix that can bring about change successfully. The processes require leaders with staying power and tenacity lasting several years. And, of course, leaders who have the passion, drive, intellect and power to move into the frontline when that is necessary and also the generosity to stay in the background, when others can and want to take over.

As the basis of my own leadership practice I have developed a personal set of core values. Here the first priority is called: Kura Sui, which is ancient Greek and means, to take care of oneself. It is vital that you can take care of yourself as a leader and as a person, because that is the prerequisite for being able to take care of other people. You must draw the lines yourself. You have to make sure to get the necessary periods of rest and suitable nourishment – both spiritually and literally.

As leader you owe it to yourself and to the community to strive for an up-to-date and balanced frame of mind – mentally, in terms of knowledge and physically. This provides the energy to solve the task and to get through the difficult processes, while at the same time engineering an existential feeling of freedom, because it means employability. The organisation is thus not going to be ‘stuck with you’ until you decide to retire, just because you were employed at one time. And you have the freedom to seek new ‘pastures’, when you feel that you have had enough.

9. Reflection on leadership theory and own practice

My leadership development has for a long time been an ongoing dialectic process between theoretical learning and reflection on own practice. Both as a leader individual, but most certainly also in an interaction with external networks and the internal leadership groups that I have been working closely with.

I don't know whether it is due to my personal temperament or the demands of our time, but there are at any rate some common traits in those leadership theories that have provided me with the best and most useful inspiration.

These are often social theories that talk about relations between people, communication and communities. Quite often they have a philosophical, artistically creative or psychological basis. They have abandoned the ideas of hierarchies, of predictable plans and fixed structures as the answer to our challenges.

They rest on the idea about the social construction, which means that we create reality together through dialogue, interaction and relations.

ⁱ Otto Sharmer who i.a. has written the book *TheoryU*