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## **Where are the sparks of fire?**

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John O'Brien, a leading management consultant, looks at how successful organisations integrate potentially conflicting priorities. The article captures the essence of live leadership seminars delivered by O'Brien to senior managers on both sides of the Atlantic.

### **The New Competitive Advantage - Integration Through Executive Development**

Imagine these words displayed on an overhead transparency in a conference room packed with senior managers, somewhere in the industrial heart of North America, or in the rural surroundings of the English Oxford countryside:

"My fingers emit sparks of fire in expectation of my future labours". William Blake.

In the course of my consultancy work to international corporations, I have been privileged to address many of the leaders of our industry in just such a manner. The slide is followed by three questions.

Firstly, "How many people here feel like this on a Monday morning?"

At best, one brave hand is raised.

The second question is, "Why not?"

At this point there is usually a mixed response - of uncomfortable shuffling and heads nodding in understanding.



"If the senior managers of our corporates are not inspired, do not embrace the responsibility of leadership with passion, enthusiasm and commitment, how can we hope to improve the wealth of our nations, and set our organisations ablaze with the creative fire which distinguishes the inspirational from the everyday, or more precisely, helps us to transform mediocrity into stellar performance?"

By the end of this third, rather long question, there has been a noticeable shift in the group. A dormant recognition of the potential within us all to transcend the ordinary has been awakened.

And yet there is a paradox. The senior managers in the room are already among the finest leaders in the industrial world. All have achieved far beyond the ordinary and most will reach the greatest heights of their professional callings. When I describe my work with these exceptional people in my role as session leader, facilitator, coach, or mentor, you will understand why I use the word 'privilege' and why I do not use it lightly. The feeling of working with leaders of great industries is no different to the feeling when working with middle managers of, for example, the Mersey Regional Ambulance Service. I am always moved, always impressed, and deeply affected by the experience.

But why should such senior people attend seminars, or continue to be coached? Despite the strength of these leaders, there seems to be a need for them to be reminded of their accomplishments and their potential, and a hunger to be stretched to new and even greater levels of performance.

Much has been written on the subject of leadership, and to that weighty body of literature I would like to add a few simple observations, drawn from my consulting experience. It seems to me that a key leadership quality is the ability to integrate seeming opposites. The example already given illustrates several such



paradoxes. The most successful among us are often the most hungry for new learning, the most independent readily seek an appropriate mentor or coach. Those who are most awake are those who know they are asleep.

In my experience, the mature management of opposites as competitive leadership advantage can be found in at least three specific areas. The first of these is the age-old tension between leadership and management. Bennis (1989) argued that leaders master content while managers surrender to it. Hickman (1990) postulated that managers are more reasonable, practical and decisive, whereas leaders are more visioning, empathic and flexible. Sadly, this differentiation between leadership and management is sometimes enacted in our companies. Such organisations are characterised by visionary leaders at Group level disparaging operational managers as lacking in creativity and sparkle. Such organisations are characterised by 'real world' operational managers who equate vision with being out of touch with reality. Such organisations are unintegrated and often, in fact, disintegrate.

I know of few real visionaries in successful leadership roles who are unconcerned with operations, and vice versa. The most successful leaders can integrate vision and operations. This capacity means being more than just one or the other as circumstances require, but actually doing both at the same time. Whereas Burns (1989) postulated a continuum between polar opposites, Beer (1986) in his "viable systems" model advocated an integrated coordination of both functions. To use a simple metaphor, successful people can both see where they are going and keep their feet on the ground.



This view seems to be supported by changing trends in leadership recruitment in the USA. Research into the leadership qualities sought by leading corporations, undertaken by Harvard Business Review published in 1990 and 1994 revealed that the most highly prized qualities were vision and strategic thinking. However, current predictive research undertaken by MC Associates 1996 (USA) suggests that this is now changing. Vision and strategic thinking are now taking second place to motivation and team leadership, qualities which in the first two research studies, did not even make the top ten list! Actually getting things done through others is now as important as, and integrated with, vision and planning.

In the most successful companies, a similar integration is taking place between 'hard' business systems and 'soft' people and cultural perspectives.

Casual empiricism (reading the appointments pages of the business papers) informs us that traditionally hard-systems oriented consultancies are now building human resource consultancy capability. But perhaps the boldest illustrative example is Thomas Group International, a Dallas based company who have taken America by storm. Thomas Group and their clients enjoyed phenomenal success from their seminal cycle time improvement methodology, and in recent years the organisation has taken a quantum leap in both performance and profit by embracing a more holistic approach which recognises the business leverage to be gained through addressing 'soft' issues.

Philip Thomas says " monitoring stakeholder relationships will foster unprecedented speed in change-management decisions, implementation and results. Integration of new processes and practices will be significantly accelerated" (Thomas, 1996)



Where hard and soft approaches to change can be linked, the real drivers of organisational transformation, the potential of the human mind and spirit, can be unleashed and synergised to operationalise vision beyond the ordinarily possible.

One of the first organisations in the UK to introduce a fully integrated approach to corporate development was one of the clearing banks, NatWest. In 1991, the Chief Executive, Martin Gray, put in place a complex system of interlinked hard and soft initiatives to drive change. All were linked in turn to a balanced business approach.

An external mentoring team was engaged to lead the executive development thrust through one-to-one coaching with the top 134 managers and success was recorded on all scorecard indicators (O'Brien, 1995). NatWest continues to innovate and lead in this field.

The new movement towards integration can be also discerned in our industrial relations climate. The move from pluralism towards unitary interests in our corporations is signalled both by the popularisation of stakeholder theory (Cyert, 1992) and employability (Bagshaw, 1996) apparent now not only in everyday language, but also in the management literature. The same movement is clear in the leading academic journals.

For example, Waterman, Waterman and Collard (1996) note that "employees must feel like valued, trusted, and perpetual members of the corporate community" and at the same time "all employees - not just bosses - must be much more aware that the purpose of the organisation is to provide goods and services that customers value, and that if the organisation does not do that, nobody in it will have a job".



A clue to the role of external coaching in this new process of integration is given by Harrison and Betof (1996) who wrote:- "New realities of the workplace mandate an intense, concentrated process which can produce rapid, dramatic new executive behavior (sic) which will be reinforced immediately by the organisation - changes in ideas, assumptions and attitudes as well as emotions and motivation are critical if lasting change is to occur."

That these new shifts in our corporate worlds is indeed taking place, is poignantly illustrated by North American research into the top 20 reasons why new executives fail. As you read the list, real world examples of your own will no doubt come to mind. Check the list against the three areas for integration you might have already identified, i.e. vision/operations, hard/soft systems and stakeholder alignment.

- Being unclear or confused over one's deliverables
- Failing to identify stakeholders and build key partnerships
- Learning the job too slowly
- Poor diagnosis -- dealing with symptoms and not real problems
- Doing what comes naturally -- staying in one's existing comfort zone
- Being unable to adapt to differences (organisational and people)
- Becoming overwhelmed/lack of composure
- Being unable or unwilling to make tough decisions
- Lacking cross-functional and work process perspective
- Failing to staff or build a team effectively
- Interpersonal problems
- Key skill deficiencies
- Difficulty in making strategic transitions
- Over-or micro-managing



- Performance problems
- Political problems
- Lack of balance between work and personal life
- Strengths, when used to excess, becoming weaknesses
- Flaws suddenly mattering
- Strengths that used to matter becoming less important
- New untested skills being required

In conclusion, the new paradigm is one of integration. Today's successful executives can envision, create and drive the future, while harvesting yesterday's investments through sound operational management. They align personal and corporate vision and integrate hard and soft systems. They meet the challenge of creating robust yet flexible systems, and of unleashing human potential while shaping its transformational energy. New leaders are living symbols of transformation, and as the light fades in the courtyard of an English country hall, or as the setting sun infuses the glass buildings of corporate America with a fiery glow of energy, imagine the feelings of our senior executive colleagues as they contemplate the final slide.

"Only a few achieve the colossal task of holding together, without being split asunder, the clarity of their vision alongside an ability to take their place in a materialistic world." (Irene de Claremont de Castillejo in Whyte, D, *The Heart Aroused*, Wiley, 1994)