

Blind to “topness”, leaders unintentionally disempower their organisations. Are you?

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In recent months I have been coaching a General Manager in an IT service business. Her business is going through significant transformation. She is exploring ways to cope with an increased experience of being overloaded and the unhelpful impact that is having on relationships, personal performance and her wellbeing. Despite being a skilled delegator, under this increased pressure, she had stopped involving her team and has been holding on to more and more herself.

As part of our shared sense making I offered my client a perspective of her experience based on Barry Oshry's human systems theory. The theory suggests predictable conditions await us all when we take on leadership responsibilities. Predictable conditions of overload. Overloaded by the volume, complexity, unpredictability of things for which we are responsible and accountable. In this overload some of us will experience a real sense of overwhelm and burden, Oshry calls this experience our “Topness”.

In our “Topness” we are vulnerable to an unconscious reflex response to our “topness”, we are at risk of taking on even more responsibility, holding on to responsibility for things that we could otherwise allow others to take on or share, and that perversely creates an experience of increased overload and burden for ourselves. A vicious cycle gets set in motion, increasing our sense of overwhelm and burden.

If we as leaders recognise any of this in our own experiences then we know it has a personal impact. We need also to pay attention to the wider disempowering consequences for our teams of this reflex tendency to suck up responsibility towards ourselves.

As a father my “topness” appears frequently in our family system. I realise, usually with “help” from my wife and daughters, that in our busy lives I often suck up more responsibility for family stuff than I need to which means my teenagers are not given the possibility to step up and grow and I increase my moments of frustration, wishing them to do more but not seeing my part in disempowering them.

When we reflexively suck up more responsibility to ourselves we disempower others as we:

- Fail to involve other minds in creatively finding solutions to our biggest challenges,
- Fail to make progress on the trickiest and perplexing items on our agenda.
- Tend to delegate the easy stuff to which we have answers.
- Deny our teams the developmental opportunities inherent in challenging projects
- Fail to build capacity in our teams to be adaptable, collaborative, and innovate.

In short, as we unconsciously suck up more responsibility to ourselves we are taking responsibility away from others. Disempowering them and the organisation. In a VUCA world this surely is not what we leaders really want to do?

Back to my client. She has identified some alternative strategies:

- Before she says “yes” to something she is committed to asking herself “do I really have to do this?” and “who else needs to be involved in this?”
- She will reflect in her Journal (my clients are encouraged to develop reflective practices using a journal) on how much responsibility she has unconsciously / reflexively “sucked up” today / this week, and identify actions to share the responsibility.
- She will involve others in her most difficult agenda items to which she has no obvious solutions.

These are her strategies, they may or may not work for you. Oshry offers some generic strategies to protect and support us in our “Topness”:

First he invites Leaders to make a general commitment to “be a top who creates responsibility throughout the system” and to be open to finding our own ways to do this. He also offers some generic strategies as follows:

- Inform: Share real and meaningful data. Trust then to use this data wisely and well. Be transparent.
- Involve: Involve others in the most important things on your agendas. The things you are stuck on.
- Develop: Invest in your people and their development. Involve others as a way to develop their capabilities. Coach them and expose them to new experiences.
- Create and use teams: bring people together for a specific purpose, use teams to solve problems, stand back and let them get on with it.
- Inspire: Be clear what your (shared) higher purpose and vision is. Keep communicating it, talk about it, and engage others on how they connect with it. Give your people a “Why?” for being at work. (*Thanks Simon Sinek*)

So what?

It matters to me that organisations are healthy, effective and productive, and that people have the most satisfying experience of work that they can have. This drives my professional work.

I want to raise awareness of our vulnerability to predictable, but so often unseen, unproductive systemic dynamics of which our reflex reaction to “Topness” is one.

I invite you to turn on your “Topness” radars. See what you notice:

- Are you feeling unusually burdened and overwhelmed?
- How much responsibility have you sucked up to yourself and away from others?
- What empowering strategies do you use well?
- What empowering strategies could you use more?
- What are your own strategies for “creating responsibility throughout your system”?

References:

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About the author:

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