Preface (to *Leadership Development Unpacked*, to be published in 2017)

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The Leadership Gap

Leadership has never been more important. Human kind is facing monumental challenges on so many levels, in so many dimensions; planetary, societal and organisational; global, regional and local; political, economic, social, technological, cultural, environmental, and commercial. There is a characteristic pattern to our emerging problems – whichever field of human activity we look at, we can see both the challenges and the potential resources or means to address them, alongside an inability to bring these together with a solution or way forward. What is often lacking is the will or means to make it happen, find a way, bring people together, resolve the complexities – essentially, a lack of *leadership*. Of course, there are always going to be other factors involved but I am suggesting that the quality of leadership is the common denominator, the key determinant to whether problems are solved and challenges met, goals achieved, potential released, progress made, futures created and opportunities realised.

Aa an indication of its importance, the topic of leadership is being discussed more than ever before, both in the general sense (e.g. 33,018 books on leadership listed in Amazon.co.uk) and in specific situations (900,000 mentions on a Guardian on-line search), e.g. from debates about the leadership elections for political parties to corporate succession issues; as both an academic subject for research, study and theory-building, as well as a very practical activity involving people every day and a set of skills, which immediately impacts many people's lives.

We can all find examples of excellent leadership, whether from the public domain or in our own lives, people who have made a difference to us personally. In leadership development workshops I have always found that participants easily identify leaders whom they admire or consider to be role models, whether from the past or present. We might even subjectively intuit that the overall quality of leadership and quantity of good leaders is increasing (depending upon how we might measure this). At the very least, it should be, given the increase in rewards for leaders and the level of investment in leadership development (we will come back to this).

However, the overriding or meta-problem with leadership concerns the gap between the rate of improvement in the capability of leadership within a given context and the rate of increase in complexity or severity of emerging problems within that context. In simple terms, the **gap** between leadership capability and the problems faced appears to be growing.

As Jean Huston puts it: *"…too many of the problems in societies today stem from leadership that is ill prepared to deal with present complexity. …too many leaders have been educated for a different time, a different world. Few are prepared for the task of dealing with the complexity and chaos of today when the usual formulas and stopgap solutions of an earlier era will not help"*. (From http://jeanhoustonfoundation.org/social-artistry/the-leadership-dilemma/)

This is a theme which might benefit from trend analysis but for now our context for leadership development is at least sharpened by the questions; "Is leadership able to keep up with the way the world is changing? And, how do we start to close the **leadership gap**?"

Of course, this also begs the question of what we mean by leadership. What does it mean to you? My use of the term is as broad and inclusive as possible, as well as specific within different contexts. In the narrow sense, all governments, communities and organisations tend to have formal leaders, sometimes an individual, sometimes a group; some are founders or de-facto leaders, some appointed, others elected. Alongside this, anyone can choose to be or act informally as a leader within a specific context (e.g. a business unit, a team, an area of expertise, a network, a family, etc.) and we all face the challenge of self-leadership. In this way I lean towards viewing leadership as a calling which we can answer, rather than a role to which we are appointed, although it can be both. In this book we will focus on formally recognised leaders or potential leaders within organisational environments, mainly because this is where leadership development is most dynamic and active today. However, I will also seek to help the reader apply the ideas, principles and practices discussed in this book to other situations.

Organisations have two basic options when it comes to improving the quality and performance of their leadership. On one hand, they can hire and fire, appoint leaders from outside or promote from within the organisation, and the fixation with 'picking the right leader' is common for filling most senior positions within business. Alternatively, organisations can recognise that leadership talent can be developed, that through support and development leaders can become better leaders and that leadership development per se is a viable and significant long term strategy for the sustainable growth and development of organisations.

The above partly places leadership development within the bigger context needed before we embark upon the journey of this book. For the other part, I want to invite you to think about the progress humankind has made with the considerable challenge of understanding ourselves, relative to our much more apparent success with making sense of the natural and physical world around us.

Leadership and *leadership development* as subjects for study and practice sit somewhere within the wider overlapping fields of human psychology and behaviour, and personal, organisational or management development. However, in terms of our understanding and mastery over what we are studying, these human and social sciences are nowhere near as developed as the natural sciences. We appear to have mastered much of our immediate external physical universe, and yet comparatively, when it comes to understanding ourselves, we are still fumbling about in the dark. I saw a clip of a talk by Paul Gibbons (2016) the other day, who describes himself as a neo-behaviourist and likens the social sciences and the quest to understand how to change behaviours 'as like chemistry was in the 1650's'. This is a fair

assessment, maybe even generous. I suggest that progress of knowledge in the human and social sciences is being seriously hampered by a number of factors, which we will touch upon in this book. In some ways, we need to make the human sciences a bit more like the natural sciences, and in other ways we need to liberate them from their constraints. Roberto Assagioli (e.g. in the Act of Will, 1974) and Ken Wilber (e.g. Integral Psychology, 2002) are examples of influencers of mine who seek to show that exploring the subjective realm of human experience can follow a scientific method and that knowledge drawn from rigorous inner-inquiry can be just as valid as that derived from outer-inquiry or experiment.

The disparity between between the human and natural sciences, between the extraordinary progress that has made in objective scientific knowledge over the last three centuries and our limited progress in understanding the more subjective mysteries of the human psyche and behaviour, is also contributing to the monumental challenges mentioned earlier. To give a simple and obvious example, we have developed sophisticated technologies capable of destroying ourselves and the planet, but are like beginners when it comes to achieving consensus around the international control and use of such technologies. Ken Wilber (2000) describes how '*all the world's cultures, past and present, are to some degree available to us in historical records or as living entities'*. He goes on to describe the uneven nature of the evolution of consciousness and how the products of one level of consciousness (e.g. scientific modernity) can be acquired by people centred at another level of consciousness (e.g. tribal pre-modernity) with potentially disastrous consequences. All kinds of technologies (e.g. from the internet, and social media, to jet travel and amazon.com) amplify the proximity and potential availability of everything to everybody, everywhere – which may sound a great idea but is creating human problems which we have not yet understood how to deal with.

To the extent to which the human sciences are making progress, the spread of knowledge is uneven and tends to concentrate where motivation or rewards are greatest, for example in large international organisations seeking to influence the behaviour of human beings for commercial gain, again with sometimes serious consequences (e.g. see the growing crisis of obesity in developed countries). Political leaders are mostly hopelessly outflanked and can either join in the commercial game or try to disguise their lack of real power. In the political realm, there are particular risks associated with a failure of leadership to catch up and close the gap – see the many recent examples of how a vacuum of good enough leadership quickly becomes filled by faux-ideologies, populists, demagogues, intolerance or even conflict. There is much debate currently in the liberal media about whether the trends we are witnessing (e.g. so called post-truth or post-rational politics, debasement of public discourse, public trolling on social media, conspiracy theories, complexity-denial, etc.) are caused or fuelled by the new technologies and digital media, or whether these simply amplify the consequences of the failure of our political leaders to address serious and growing underlying social problems (e.g. inequality, scarce resources, cultural disharmony and youth disaffection).

Adam Curtis' latest documentary film of our times, HyperNormalisation (2016), echoes this state of affairs and tells the story of *"How we got to this strange time of great uncertainty and confusion where those who are supposed to be in power are paralysed and have no idea what to do".*

In the commercial organisational world, the consequences of the leadership gap may not be so public, but can be devastating at a personal level when a business folds or a valuable business unit is trashed for the wrong reasons. Success and failure have always been essential parts of the entrepreneurial market game, but too often dumb, egotistical or narcissistic leadership is an avoidable cause of misery (e.g. see the recent unravelling of BHS). We might wonder how the banking world appears incapable of meaningful reform even eight years on from the global financial crisis (viz. RBS continuing to make record setting losses). Market regulators only seem able to make correct decisions post-hoc and public services such as the NHS and our schooling system lurch from one crisis to another. The 'emperor's new clothes' is now such a frequently invoked metaphor that it is losing its impact – consider the array of public and private leaders that are hauled up these days in front of one parliamentary sub-committee or another for their moment of public shaming.

This all brings us back to leadership and the urgent challenge of becoming better at it, as the wider context for leadership development. There is a need to start closing the gap between leadership capability and the world in which it operates and this book is humbly offered up as a contribution with that in mind.

You might be feeling that that this is all a bit too much grand visioning and that all you are interested in is becoming a better leader or a better leadership development coach. This book also works at that level and is designed to be read in the way that is most useful to you, so please stay with me. Paradoxically I believe that within this rather grand and possibly depressing context I have set, everything can make a difference, every act of leadership development, every personal leadership endeavour, improvement or learning which takes place within the spirit of contribution. To end this context-setting preface, I will share the words of Pierro Ferrucci (What we May Be, 1982) on this theme:

If you work on yourself, you are already participating in the extraordinary ageless work of overcoming darkness and pain, and the evocation of latent potential. Take some time to realize that this work is not only your own private project, but the part of a wider unfoldment in which countless individuals are participating in many ways; the evolution of humankind.