

## Completely Lacking

**By Stuart White**  
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I am wondering how some of the country's government and top civil servants would react if they came into work one morning to find that an anonymous employee had slipped an article on their desk entitled 'The Incomplete Leader'? That's what happened to me this week. Eek, I thought – is someone trying to tell me something? Many would immediately instigate a witch hunt to track down the perpetrator but that's not my way. I chose to play along, read the article and deal with it much more subtly.....

It was a leadership article which appeared in the Harvard Business Review (HBR) way back in 2007, and as nothing dramatic has changed in leadership thinking in the last couple of years, the content seemed strikingly relevant today. The gist of it was that the sooner leaders stop trying to be all things to all people the better off their organisations will be. In other words, they can't be a one-man band. A leader has to oversee so much in so many territories that it is unrealistic to think they can deliver on all fronts. No one person can stay on top of everything, yet it's that trying to be 'completely' effective and the inability to delegate appropriately that is the downfall of many leaders. Instead of allowing the marketing executives do what they do best – market, finance people to do what they do best – look after the money and the engineering blokes to come up with strategies to meet customer needs, leaders, in order to combat the perceived fear of appearing incompetent often exhaust themselves by trying to do everything and damage their organisations in the process.

Guys and girls at the MIT Leadership Centre say that they have worked with hundreds of people who have struggled under the weight of the myth that there is such a thing as a complete leader. So the brains at MIT developed a model of distributed leadership. The model highlights four leadership capabilities; sense-making (understanding the world around us); relating (building internal and external relationships); visioning (creating a compelling picture of the future) and inventing (developing new ways to achieve the vision). HBR says rarely will someone be equally skilled in all four domains. Most are inevitably incomplete leaders but the smart ones recognise this. They understand what they are good at and what they are not and have sound judgment about how they can work with others to build on their strengths and offset their weaknesses.

I know that management and leadership are often used interchangeably. But let's be clear they are quite different. You manage results and processes; you lead people. The main quality in leadership is passion and instilling a sense of urgency in your staff in order to create action to tackle and solve the varied complex problems that we all face in business. Leadership and passion cannot be delegated the way you can delegate management tasks. Therefore, a true leadership organisation must embrace the principles of distributed leadership through every part and every level of the organisation. Similarly one person in the organisation can't be solely responsible for leadership tasks. Even with the best will in the world it can't be done so the load has to be shared.

These four leadership capabilities, I mention are essential. If you don't have the 'sense-making' you don't have your starting place because your grasp of current reality is warped. If you can't relate to the team you can't mobilise the people and that is the essence of leadership because the people are the ones who are going to deliver the results you want. Without the vision there is no destination or direction and without inventing we can't move from where we are today towards the vision. They are all interdependent and essential and this model works at every level throughout the organisation.

Blinkered incomplete leaders don't recognise they are incomplete, preferring to think they are all things to all people – you see it every day – the 'I'm the boss', 'leader knows best' mentality and it's a sure recipe for failure. Thinking you can deliver in all four areas is flawed. Typically leaders will only be strong in one or two capabilities (meaning the leader who believes himself to be complete will be ineffective at least 50% of the time – really scary odds). Take any leader in town and you can be sure they can't tick all 4 boxes. It takes supreme insight to recognise this, though, one of the most essential qualities of effective leadership and successful industrial or governmental captaincy.

The key is for leaders to search for others who can plug their gaps. When two people see things the same way or are the same in terms of capability – one is unnecessary. Yet leaders so often want to recruit a team of people who mirror what they are – and all that gets is easy agreement in the boardroom when trying to pass resolutions but it only equals one brain at work. It's great and comforting when everyone sees the world as you do – but truth be told how can it possibly help? When everyone is the same they tilt every business decision in the same direction time after time. It is the leader's responsibility to not fall into this trap but rather create an environment that lets people complement one another's strengths and weaknesses. In this way leadership is 'distributed' across multiple people throughout the organisation, each contributing their individual strengths to make a solid whole. That's the difference between progress and stagnation, or even worse, regression.

So for the clever little Troll who put that article on my desk - beware. I am taking stock, assessing my strengths and delegating that which I am not good at to the team. So more work coming your way, in order to make me more complete. You wanted it, you got it, My bad! Tweet this article...

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Managing Director

HRMC

Phone: 395 1640

<http://www.hrmc.co.bw/>

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