The Philosophical Dimension of Leadership Attunement

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates that in times of discontinuous change, leaders need to shift from a predominantly scientific ethos to the development of their philosophical practices. It will show that while under conditions of stability there is no essential need for philosophy in leadership, under conditions of change leaders need to be able to make explicit, question and transform habits of doing things. It will show, by example that philosophy is a process of performing these functions. It will draw on a range of experiences from both philosophers and leaders in organizations to bring out the value of “philosophical experiences” for leaders.

Key words:
Philosophical experiences, Socrates, paradigms, disruptions
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In this paper I will argue that in times of discontinuous change there is a need for leaders to move beyond a scientific to a philosophical mindset. This is because it is in times of change that our paradigms and mindsets are challenged in such a way that we need to make explicit, think about, question and transform the conventions which under conditions of stability we were able to take for granted. The activity of making explicit, thinking about and challenging our paradigms in the context of the crisis of change is, as I shall demonstrate, a philosophical and not a scientific activity. Science, as I will demonstrate, is concerned with analyzing and observing the observable world – not deconstructing the assumptions in terms of which we examine the world. This latter function is the role of philosophy.

The idea that scientists, academics, CEO’s become philosophical when faced with a crisis in their habitual ways of doing things is articulated in Thomas Kuhn’s philosophy of science. Thomas Kuhn in the development of his philosophy of science maintains that scientists are, for the most part, not concerned with being philosophical. Rather, they are concerned with getting on with their everyday activities as scientists. This involves issues such as puzzle solving, conducting experiments, observing and analysing data. In these activities there is neither need nor room for philosophy. Philosophy, in this context would be a distraction which takes them away from their everyday activities. However, when scientists cannot take their habitual ways of doing things for granted, they tend to become philosophical. They tend to question the paradigms and assumptions underpinning them: “Scientists have not generally needed or wanted to be philosophers. Indeed, normal
science usually holds creative philosophy at arms length, and probably for good reason. To the extent that normal research work can be conducted by using the paradigm as a model, rules and assumptions need not be made explicit. It is, I think, particularly in periods of crisis that scientists have turned to philosophical analysis as a device to unlock the riddles of their field.” (Kuhn, 1970, p88)

Here it can be seen that the activity of questioning paradigms is not a scientific but a philosophical activity. This is because it involves the experience of questioning our fundamental assumptions – not objective reality but the terms in which we make sense of objective reality. It is also important to highlight that the experience of questioning our assumptions is not a psychological but a philosophical activity. An interesting way in which this point has recently been developed in popular management literature is to be found in Stephen Covey’s Seven Habits of Effective People. He distinguishes between what he calls the Personality Ethic and the “Character Ethic.” He maintains that views of success in the twentieth century has for the most part been dominated by the Personality Ethic, the view that success is a “function of personality, of public image, of attitudes and behaviours, skills and techniques….” (Covey, 1989, p19)

In contrast to this the Character Ethic asserts that success is underpinned by “basic principles of effective living.” In turn these principles are rooted in a “paradigm.” A paradigm, from his perspective, is a kind of mental map that allows us to see the world in a certain way. Just as we need a physical map of a new city to guide us, so we are always guided by mental maps. We cannot function without such maps. Furthermore, for the
most part we tend to take our mental maps for granted. We use them without explicitly thinking about them. It is in times of change or in the moment of a paradigm switch that we become attuned to our mental maps or paradigms of doing things. It is in change that we think about our ways of seeing things. And thus it is in times of change that we tend to become philosophical.

Historically management has been dominated by the personality ethic, by the view that our personality rather than our paradigm shapes the way we behave. While not denying that personality has an effect on our behaviour, there is more and more literature suggesting that we need to move towards an understanding of management paradigms. An example of such a move can be found in the work of Bolman and Deal’s book Reframing Organisations. In their work, Bolman and Deal see the central task of managers as being able to reframe organisational behaviour by drawing on what they see as the four frames of organisational behaviour. They call the frames the structural, human resource, political and cultural frame. Each frame provides a manager with a different lens through which to understand organisations. Each lens is underpinned by a certain set of assumptions. In order to switch frames managers need to be familiar with the set of assumptions contained in the frames. These four frames define the paradigms in terms of which organisational experience is intelligible. Reframing is a philosophical activity because we are not examining the world as such but the terms or assumptions in which we make sense of the world. We are not concerned with this or that aspect of our experience but of the frameworks in which we make sense of experience. We are taking a
step back from the everyday world and examining the terms in which we make sense of this world.

Here we can remind ourselves of the distinction between scientific analysis and philosophical reflection: whereas science – especially in its positivist forms – is concerned with the analysis of objects and data out there in the world, philosophy is concerned with reflecting on the assumptions that guide a scientists observations and analysis of data in the world. It is concerned with reflecting on the frames in terms of which scientists view the world. To be concerned with the frames of scientists, managers, leaders, organisations is to enter into a philosophical activity.

From Bolman and Deal’s perspective, reflection on the assumptions underlying our experience needs to be distinguished from rational deliberation about data: “Prevailing mythology depicts managers as rational men and women who plan, organise, co-ordinate and control … What a reassuring picture of clarity and order this is! Unfortunately it is wrong. … Led to believe that they should be rational and on top of it all, managers become confused and bewildered.” (Bolman and Deal, 203, p304) It is by accepting the experience of being confused and bewildered that managers can begin to develop a reflective relationship to their experience. Bolman and Deal say that it is when “someone’s actions make no sense” that the opportunity for reflecting on our own and their frame of reference becomes possible. For when things make no sense we are stopped in our track, feel perplexed and are then ready to reflect on underlying frames or assumptions. They call these moments of being unable to make sense moments of
Such cluelessness they maintain is rife in management but more often than not avoided rather than accounted for.

Bolman and Deal see the need for managers to come to terms with cluelessness. In fact they see cluelessness as the basis of a paradigm shift. For it as we lose sense of one way of doing things that we become open to a new way of doing things. Unfortunately Bolman and Deal do not develop an understanding of the process of moving from one frame of reference to another. They do say that it requires a process of “helicopter thinking or “thinking from he balcony” but they do not say what goes into this process of thinking. They say that it involves a combination of “analysis, intuition and artistry” but they do not describe the art like process of such thinking. The central focus of this article is to describe the process of moving between frames or paradigms. This will be done by developing a concept that I shall call “philosophical experiences.” I will use the figure of Socrates as a model of a “philosophical experience. After having developed the Socratic model of a philosophical experience, I will demonstrate the place of philosophical experiences in the context of leadership.

In contrast to the popular image of philosophy as something abstract and unintelligible, philosophy is actually a very concrete activity when it is engaged in its appropriate context. The context for philosophy, as already indicated by Kuhn is a disruption in our conventional ways of doing things. For the most part, when things are running smoothly, we do not need to be philosophical. In order to achieve our ends, we need to get on with
the demands of everyday living. To be philosophical when we should be “efficient” or practical would be self-destructive.

However, there are times in all of our lives when we do experience a disruption to our conventional or habitual ways of doing things. For example, in the experience of the death of a loved one, our everyday lives are disrupted in such a way that we cannot help but start to question the meaning of life. Our whole mood shifts in such experiences. We move out of the mood of everyday efficiency into a mood of contemplative reflection. In the face of death life feels strange and in the face of the haunting strangeness of life, we find ourselves asking the question of meaning. In the mood of death, the question of meaning does not seem to be an abstract question but a very concrete question. Indeed it is often experienced as chilling. It is something that grabs us. We find ourselves asking and exploring questions that we never thought we would ask. It offers us the opportunity to evaluate the way we have lived our lives and examine our projects for the future. In such an experience what we have been doing is exploring our own assumptions about life. These assumptions are usually implicit in our experiences. They guide our way of experiencing the world without us being aware of the way in which they guide us. It is at times of death that our life assumptions become explicit. These moments of explicitness can be used as occasions upon which to rethink or reaffirm our life assumptions.

This conception of the philosophical process has its roots in Socrates, recognised by many as the father of philosophy and thus of rational thinking in the Western world. In accounting for his own process of thinking, Socrates often says that he came to
philosophy not because he was more intelligent than anyone else but because he was
confused – or as he puts it, perplexed. As he puts it: “I perplex others, not because I am
clear, but because I am utterly perplexed myself.” (Plato 1976, p128)

Because he was confused and perplexed and because he accepted rather than denied his
confusion, he was able to ask questions of those things that most people took for granted.
He did not believe that he was necessarily wiser than other people – only that he knew
that he did not know and because he knew that he did not know he could see that which
most people took for granted, that is, the conventions of the society. Because he was
perplexed in this way he was constantly thinking about the conventions of the society and
challenging others to think about them. Socrates’ aim in this regard was to help people
examine their lives because he believed that the dangers of an unexamined life created a
pervasive sense of meaninglessness. Or as he put it, the unexamined life is not worth
living. Without examining the conventions that guide us, we lose sense of why we do
whatever it is that we do. We tend to live in an automatic way without having an
embedded sense of the purpose for achieving the particular ends that we are striving to
achieve or of the relation between the means and ends, that is, whether our means are in
fact achieving the ends.

Indeed, from a Socratic perspective, without examining our lives we have no way of
knowing whether the things that we do are not self-destructive. For example, it might
well be the case that in striving after pleasure or happiness we might be enslaving
ourselves to our desires. Socrates gives the example of a drug addict who in constantly
satisfying the desire does not release himself from the desire but needs more and more fixes to satisfy himself. He thus becomes a greater slave to his desire. So too the need to satisfy our consumer desires does not necessarily bring satisfaction but an increasing enslavement to the desire. For Socrates, only by examining our lives are we able to understand the place of happiness and pleasure in our lives.

What we see in Socrates is that it was the way in which he engaged with his perplexity that allowed him to question the conventions of the society in which he lived. The role of disruption in opening up the mood of philosophy is not limited to Socrates. To be sure the form of disruption differs from philosopher to philosopher. For example, in the case of Montaigne, it was melancholia rather than a sense of being perplexed that lead him into the mood and activity of philosophy. In the philosophy of Descartes, it was doubt that lead him into reflecting on the conventions which had shaped society and to begin to develop new conventions for philosophical activity. An interesting case is that of the philosopher John Stuart Mill. His disruption in the form of overwhelming anxiety and uncertainty lead him from one style of doing philosophy to another. It lead him away from a reliance on rationality to an appreciation of the role of emotion in thinking. And in modern times existential philosophers have emphasized the role of disruption in philosophy. In Nietzsche, for example, nihilism comes to be the basis for examining and challenging the conventions of society. In the writing of Sartre, the confrontation with the nature of existence is made possible by the experience of nausea and in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger it is through the experience of anxiety that the question of Being is raised as a meaningful question.
The last chapter allows us to identify certain features of the philosophical experience. It is not an everyday experience. It is an experience which becomes significant when we cannot take our habits of practice or our everyday way of doing things for granted. It disrupts or jolts us out of our everyday complacency. In the experience of disruption we come to see the assumptions which have guided our way of experiencing the world but have for the most part been implicit. We are challenged to question our taken for granted ways of seeing things. The philosophical experience opens up the possibility of seeing and experiencing the world in new ways.

How does this description of the philosophical experience relate to management?

It is a common observation that we live in a world of change. The more things change, the less we can rely on our habitual ways of doing things. The more things change, the more we need to be able to think “outside of our boxes.” The original image for thinking outside of our boxes is in fact derived from the philosopher Plato who says that philosophy begins in the moment of learning to think outside of “our caves.” For Plato philosophy begins where we leave the “comfort zone” of the familiar.

Historically as John Kotter tells us managers have not been trained for thinking outside of our caves or boxes. Rather managers have been trained to think under conditions of stability: “too many people have been trained for and raised in a more stable world, a world that for the most part no longer exists. Too many people have been trained only to
manage the current system or to make incremental shifts. They have not been shown how
to provide the leadership necessary to make bigger leaps.” (1999)

Yet as, amongst others Jack Welch tells us, we are living in times where we cannot take the conventions of management for granted. In the context of arguing for the limitations of scientific rationalist approaches to management Welch has said: “We have to undo a 100-year old concept [of scientific management] and convince managers that their role is not to control people and stay ‘on top’ of things, but rather to guide, energize, and excite.” (Lowe; 1998)

Welch is suggesting that we cannot take the traditional assumptions of management for granted. These assumptions informed by the scientific tradition in management are no longer appropriate to the everyday reality in which managers, leaders and people in organisations find themselves. As Kotter suggests in the above quotation, managers and leaders find themselves in a position of questioning their habitual assumptions and conventions. In the terms of this book, they find themselves in the middle of a philosophical experience in which the old assumptions are no longer valid but no new ones have yet taken root – if anything there are a number of fads, none of which have been affirmed as an enduring foundation for management.

Whether they like it or not, those managers and leaders who experience the collapse of the old assumptions are in a process of questioning the assumptions of management. It may not be something they asked for. It may not be something that they wish to do.
Indeed they may simply wish to carry on with their job. But once having experienced the unviability of the traditional way of doing things, they are thrown into the uncertainty of questioning. They are thrown into a philosophical mode. In this space we need to embrace and engage in the art of questioning. This is why Lou Gerstner of IBM can say: “Once you think you’re at the point that it’s time to write it down, build the manual, and document the formula, you’re no longer exploring, questioning, the status quo. We are constantly challenging what we do – building a culture of restless self-renewal.” (Neff, 1999)

It is in the space between the collapse of the old management assumptions and the not yet of the new that we engage in such questioning. The idea of building a culture of restless renewal through constantly questioning the status quo lies at the heart of philosophy. Socrates, the archetypal philosopher of the Western world is famous for his process of constantly questioning everything, not for the sake of being clever but because it always opened up new possibilities and ways of seeing things – just as is the case of Gerstner. Socrates is identified as a philosopher because of his process of constantly questioning the status quo. Furthermore, he questioned in the experience of being between the collapse of Athens traditional image of itself as a military empire and the not yet of a new way of being for Athens, one in which Athens would become a seat of learning that would influence Western thought for at least the next two thousand years.

Although it may come as a surprise to many, philosophy is not an abstract but a very concrete activity. Its concreteness is to be found in the mood of uncertainty that is
experienced when caught between the collapse of the old and the not yet of the new way of doing things. The insecurity and uncertainty experienced in the between is the mood that makes philosophy concrete and relevant. Philosophy is based on the ability to tolerate and embrace the uncertainty. Instead of withdrawing or becoming paralysed in the face of the uncertainty, philosophy is the willingness to turn that uncertainty into a dynamic energy of questioning and finding direction. This is why Jack Welch says that his success as a manager and leader lay in the development of a philosophy. Writing about his experience as CEO of GE he says that what came out of his experience is “no gospel or management handbook…. There is a philosophy that came out of my journey.” (Welch 2001, pxv) It was through a philosophy that Jack Welch found direction in the face of the uncertainty of being caught between the collapse of the old conventions and the not yet of the new management conventions.

It is important not to miss the significance of Welch’s point. It is not good enough for a manager to have only a manual or a technique. They must also have a philosophy. For it is a philosophy which gives the flexibility of thought and vision to be able to respond in proactive ways to the often unanticipated changes in conventions or ways of doing things. Because we cannot always predict what changes will take place, we cannot always have “the plan” to deal with change. Rather we need to have the flexibility of mind that is able to adjust to changes. This flexibility comes from engaging in the activity of philosophising.
Agreeing with Welch also means shifting the emphasis of management education away from an exclusive reliance on technique and formula to one that takes the discipline of philosophy seriously. Welch did institutionalises practices in GE for thinking in the face of disruption. His educational style is based on the ability to turn what he calls experiences of the “Vortex” into learning opportunities. “Vortex” experiences are those experiences in which a manager, because of a crisis in their practice begins to doubt their management style. They lose confidence in their way of doing things. These experiences are from Welch’s perspective, opportunities to reflect on and challenge our habitual ways of doing things so as to develop new possibilities for our management practices.

Questioning the status quo was essential to Welch’s management style. He often stood outside of the conventional or habitual ways of doing things, challenged people to see things in new ways and was more than able to withstand the pressure to conform coming from the heard. Referring to the first time in which he spoke to the Wall market analysts he says that he did not give them the message that they wanted to hear. In fact he challenged the very terms in which they analysed the financial data of organisations. Instead of giving them hard facts, he gave them a lecture on the value of soft skills in organisations. They could not make sense of anything that he was saying. He experienced them as looking at him as though he was crazy. Yet rather than turning away from his position, it made him more determined to challenge their assumptions by clarifying his position: “Over a 20 minute speech, I gave [Wall street analysts] little of what they wanted and quickly launched into a qualitative discussion around the vision for the company. … At the end this crowed thought they were getting more hot air than
substance. One of our staffers overheard one analyst moan, “We don’t know what the hell he’s talking about.’ I left the hotel ballroom knowing there had to be a better way to tell our story. Wall Street had listened, and Wall Street had yawned.” (Welch 2001, p105)

The idea of being able to withstand the pressure of standing outside of the status quo has always been at the centre of philosophy. Socrates saw his role in ancient Greece as that of a gadfly to the state, constantly interrogating it in order that it would be aware of the assumptions guiding its way of doing things. No matter how much he was pressurised into adopting a conformists position, he had the will and resolve to stand outside of the heard – to the extent of being resolved to be put to death for his commitment.
A corporate CEO who learnt the art of philosophical questioning in a painful disruption is Andrew Grove of Intel. For Grove the process of “philosophical questioning” became part of his leadership “toolkit” or approach. When confronted with situations that threw his habitual assumptions into question, he was not overwhelmed or flummoxed but turned these experiences into opportunities for seeing things in a new way. An example that he gives concerns the significance of Netscape: “I remember being shocked by the Netscape IPO. I was quite familiar with Netscape, and for that company to be valued at $4 billion or $5 billion after it came out - that stunned me. But that shock had a positive impact, because it made me think, hey, you better rethink your prejudices, because people are seeing something here that you are not seeing. I mean, I thought the browser was an interesting piece of software, but not a life-altering or strategy-altering technology.” (Heileman 2001)

Here we see how Grove is able to turn an experience of being shocked into an opportunity for questioning his assumptions and how through questioning his assumptions he is able to see something in a new way, that is, he begins to see the browser in a completely new way as a strategy-altering technology. This is philosophy. Philosophy is that activity of questioning assumptions. Existential philosophy is that activity of questioning assumptions in the face of a shocking, disturbing or jarring experience, in those moments that we experience that reality is not the way we thought it was. Crucial to this practice of philosophising is the willingness to turn moments of shock into educational opportunities, that is opportunities for questioning and seeing things in new ways. It is not inevitable that shock will lead to an educational attunement.
It can and often does lead to a sense of defensiveness where we remain blinded by our inability to move beyond our habitual ways of seeing things.

The danger of not being sensitive to assumptions that need to be questioned is highlighted by Ram Charan and Jerry Useem in their analysis of failure at Cisco. Cisco, they claimed had developed a system that would enable them to predict the future. However, the future did not turn out as the system predicted. In coming to grips with why the future did not turn out as predicted, Cisco had to contend with the fact that it had not questioned key assumptions in developing its predicative system. As Charan and Useem maintain: “Cisco's managers, it turned out, never bothered to model what would happen if a key assumption--growth--disappeared from the equation. After all, the company had recorded more than 40 straight quarters of growth; why wouldn't the future bring more of the same?” (Charan and Useem)

Questioning of assumptions is not an elementary process. Assumptions do not just show themselves or present themselves for questioning. We need to be able to notice that we are making assumptions which, as we see in the case of Cisco, we are not always aware of. We are usually blind to the assumptions that we make. And because we are blind to them, we cannot just decide to question our assumptions. For by definition that which we are blind to is outside of the scope of what we can see. We cannot simply decide to see what we are blind to. We would not know where to begin. We need to be able to make that which we are blind to explicit for ourselves. How do we go about doing this? How would Cisco be able to sensitize itself to the fact that it is making assumptions? And how
would it work with the assumptions once it had made them explicit? These are philosophical questions; questions that we need to develop a philosophical discipline to handle. Grove makes this point: “All businesses operate by some set of unstated rules and sometimes these rules change. … Yet there is no flashing sign that heralds these rule changes. They creep on you … without warning.” (Grove 1997, p20)

For Socrates the examination of experience requires what has come to be known as “Socratic humility.” This is the humility of being attentive to what is taken for granted in our own opinions and perspectives. – indeed it is the humility to treat our perspectives as opinions, as views open to doubt and not as knowledge that is beyond doubt. This allows us to not only examine the perspectives of others but to examine our own perspectives. The basis of Socratic humility was Socratic ignorance or Socrates’ view that he knew nothing. Because he believed he knew nothing, he took less and less for granted and so was able to see and examine more and more. He never took his own or others way of framing experience for granted and so was able to examine the assumptions hidden in experience. The resolute acceptance of not knowing then is the basis of Socratic reflection.

We see this attitude in a number of leaders today. It is to be found in the humility of Nelson Mandela who is known to interrogate himself through his secretaries. As Andrea Brink writes: “The human side to Mandela's stumblings is revealed by an account one of his private secretaries gave of his recent visit to Scandinavia: it seems that every night, after retiring, he would summon his three secretaries to his bedroom where he would ask
them, "Now tell me what I have done wrong today, because I don't want to make the same mistakes tomorrow."

It is precisely with being aware of the fact that we are not always aware of our assumptions that philosophy is concerned. The job of Socratic philosophy is to be sensitive to that which we are not aware of in our way of experiencing the world. By becoming aware of that which we are not aware of we are able to catch sight of the beliefs, worldviews, paradigms and assumptions in which we do make sense of experience. To understand ourselves as leaders and managers we need to understand the frameworks in which we carry out our day to day activities in the workplace. We need to understand our perspectives as managers and leaders not by reading and learning already established theories of leadership and management but by developing a way of examining our own experiences. Our experiences allow us to understand our own assumptions. Only by understanding them can we come to terms with blind spots in ourselves and create the opportunity for excellence in our professional practices.

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