



LEADERSHIP AWARDS, 25 NOVEMBER 2016, MAYFAIR HOTEL, LONDON

Transcript of Dr William Tate's Keynote Speech

Good evening. I feel greatly honoured to be asked to address you.

There's a lot of it about – interest in leadership, and a feeling that it can be and needs to be better. What are today's top media stories? – the Met's leadership of child protection, and something similar in football coaching. Then we have presidents and prime ministers working hard to put the clock back, as if the last hour of October was nowhere near sufficient. I do make exceptions for putting the clock back: I long for an age before we moneytised everything. But nostalgia isn't what it used to be.

But just think Syria, populations on the move, global warming, growing nationalism, banks. Think Brexit, the NHS, budget cuts, efficiency savings.

It's not possible to stop globalisation, robotics or mass movements. It's not possible to stop technology, generational change and society's attitudes. So we need a view of leadership that is progressive. A view that takes us forward. And it's a tough challenge. That is why we need different and better leadership.

It is easy to equate leadership with individual leaders in high positions of authority. But as well as these leaders, there is the *process* of leadership. We need to think of and manage both leaders and leadership. Now there's an oxymoron for you. 'Managing leadership'. But it's true. If an organisation wants leadership to be manifested and put into practice, then it has to be managed. That's more important than leadership *development* activity. Development alone doesn't deliver change.

Then there is collective leadership. And there is systemic leadership – that is, leadership that is shaped by the systemic context – the way the organisation is behaving when looked at as a system. We are interested in all of these manifestations of leadership and these sources of agency.

One of the big issues at the moment is people feeling a loss of control. People want more control, and they favour leaders who promise control or who seem to have it in their power to deliver control. It's easy to be in charge but not in control. (Like being in office but not in power, if you remember that political taunt.) And being in control of situations is becoming more difficult. There are explanations from complexity science for why this is so, which we can't go into here.

This matters because leaders tempt us to believe they can deliver change for a different time – backwards or forwards. Mostly they can't. But change continues to evolve anyway, much like nature. Predicting, controlling and delivering pledged outcomes are increasingly seen as the false gods of management.

Leaders' grand and planned change is largely unrealisable. Theresa May is discovering that with her Brexit planning. When you look at some of the characters you may think this is hardly surprising. But it's always a problem where there are people engaged in a complex social system. That is more a socio-psychological phenomenon than personal psychology. To find leadership in the system, organisations should be investing in the more socially informed disciplines such as ethology, cultural theory and social anthropology.

A recurring leadership sickness in management and leadership is breaking problems down in a mechanistic manner and trying to fix the whole by fixing isolated parts. This approach (reductionism or atomisation) goes back to the 17th century, to the physical world of Isaac Newton and Rene Descartes. Arguably, it reached its apogee 100 years ago. It bedevils managers' and leaders' thinking to this day. It has to do with how cause and effect are assumed to link mechanistically – or more often don't. Most of the time, cause and effect don't connect in a neat linear way. The reason?: people get in the way. We all have a different mix of experiences, thoughts, emotions, needs and wants and opinions.

A few of you may be familiar with Luigi Pirandello's 1921 classic play *Six Actors in Search of an Author*. If so, you will know what I'm talking about. That play is an apt metaphor for our time. A dysfunctional family, describing themselves as six actors looking for an author, gatecrash another bunch of actors rehearsing another Pirandello play called *Mixing It Up!* The family gradually takes over the rehearsal, and explain to those gatecrashed that they will enact their own life story. They claim that you don't need to be acting out roles when you have real life to play with. Real life is far more interesting and dramatic. Why pretend?

Now think about the recent US presidential election. Was Donald Trump working to a script that would get him elected, knowing that he would need to transform himself if he was to govern? Or was he just being himself? Is that not rather admirable and reassuring?

Think referendum and Brexit. Think gatecrashing a performance and Tony Blair's return to the political debate. And consider Theresa May's leadership team and its cast of characters and the performance they are engaged in. Are they acting or are they real? Are they in role or are they just playing themselves? There is a school of thought that says leaders should be authentic, true to themselves. But is that a strength? Which character should we trust?

In the Pirandello play the final scene is the youngest son committing suicide. It appears that the boy has drowned his baby sister. And by the end the director of the initial rehearsal of *Mixing It Up!* has become so confused that she doesn't know what she has just witnessed: what actually happened? She muses: was it just acting pretending to be real, or was it real and pretending to be acting? Then the curtain comes down.

In our current world too, what are we the public witnessing? Are we witnessing an act, a game? Can it really be real? Should we take the performance seriously? Should we take the actors seriously? What is world leadership up to? Are our leaders more part of the problem than the solution?

Good leadership is difficult. At one level it deserves our admiration and gratitude. When it's bad it deserves our contempt. Either way, leadership sits within and is a system of relationships. We need to open our eyes and learn how to see that system. What are we trying to do to the system, in the system that we are ourselves a part of, and what is the system doing to us?

Leadership is about many things: leaders' personality, morals, skills, appearance, and crucially the question of what leadership is for. Organisations put a lot of effort and expense into defining, assessing and developing leaders, and very little into thinking about what they want leadership for. The purpose of leadership is to make tomorrow better than today. And context is everything.

Ten days ago we heard that Aileen McColgan, the barrister who was leading the Child Abuse Inquiry's investigation into the Anglican and Catholic churches, had resigned over concerns about the Inquiry's leadership.

This reminded me of the real-life story and brilliant film *Spotlight*, set in Boston USA, where the Boston Globe newspaper was investigating cases of child abuse practised by Catholic priests. To reporters it seemed like a small number of priests needed to be 'spotlighted', then it was many, then it became apparent that the problem lay in the hierarchy, right up to the archbishop. Then it was the ethos and canonical teaching ("it didn't count if it gave no pleasure" was the defence), and then it was the whole system that needed to be in the dock. That system included all the professions and authorities that made a very nice living out of continuation of the abuse, hence covering up allegations.

There were several leadership issues – layers of them – a bit like the Pirandello play. But one that is germane to us here is that the leader of the Boston Globe Spotlight journalistic team had to work hard to convince his staff to see the bigger picture and be patient and not settle for tinkering at the margins by catching and prosecuting a few aberrant priests. There were bigger fish.

Leadership is disturbance. Leadership challenges the status quo. Leadership causes trouble. Leadership needs to cause trouble. That is why I am fascinated by tonight's leadership award category of Positive Deviant Leader and the behaviour of outliers in organisations. Two weeks ago, an American friend of mine said "Business-as-usual is getting a shake." More Americans wanted that shake than they wanted more of the same; more than Hillary Clinton realised. Donald Trump is an outlier, but whether his effect is positive or negative, I will leave you to judge. I don't think he would have made it to the list of today's finalists. He would have been fired.

Or take the just-ended trial of Thomas Mair for the murder of Jo Cox MP for Batley and Spen. Jo Cox was a leader, although she didn't hold a formal leadership office. But in her limited role and with her limited powers as an opposition party backbench MP she showed true qualities of leadership, nowhere more so than in her work with Syrian refugees. She stood up to leaders. She was tough and energetic in her cause. She didn't take No for an answer. We need more leaders like Jo Cox. And perhaps we can quietly and privately acknowledge her leadership here today. She would have deserved one of our awards had she still been alive. Even as she was dying, Jo showed leadership towards her two colleagues.

Leadership is open to anyone. This is 'distributed' leadership. You don't find it much on leadership development programmes; those are reserved for managers with formal leadership authority. They may not consider it in their interest to share their leadership. But you find this kind of leadership – and you liberate it – in and through the organisation culture and the system.

Which brings me to my final point. Remember the bigger fish in the film *Spotlight*. I am often associated with the metaphor of a fishtank representing an organisation. We gape at the fish. We think it's all about the fish. We want them to look good. If they are looking a bit sluggish we take them out of the water, give them a good talking to, a polish, and then plop them back in the same old dirty water. And, of course, they revert to type. We hardly notice the water. Is it being properly oxygenated? Is it clear and navigable? Is it warm and safe? Who is responsible for removing the toxins? Where is governance of the water? And how do the big fish behave towards the little fish?

The water represents the system. It is all those things going on between and around the fish. It is people's relationships, with each other, with their organisation and with their environment. It is in the water that we can find the answers. The water can help liberate leadership or it can squash it.

I will end with a quote from Max de Pree:

*"The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality.
The second responsibility is to say 'thank you'.
And in between the leader should be a servant. "*

'Thank you for listening!' Enjoy the rest of your evening.

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