What are Canadian leaders reading?

Hugh MacLeod

Recently I read to my grandson my favourite book on leadership, The Little Engine That Could, the children’s classic. It’s about a journey, community involvement, overcoming roadblocks, crisis conquering, competition, ego and self-indulgence, work jurisdiction and turf, old versus new technology, courage and the power within, and getting on with it. The key leadership message is simple - saying at a deep level “I think I can, I think I can” in an organization that sets the tracks up the hill and at just the right angle of challenge.

Deep down, we all know, no matter what position we occupy in a group, team or organization, that sooner or later we are going to be put to the test. We will be challenged on our current certainties and our ambitions (conscious and unconscious). Our metal needs tempering. We will be tempered by one-on-one reflections with self and moments of self truth.

The Little Engine That Could illustrates that leadership is hard work - adaptive work. Leadership is dynamic: it changes and moulds to circumstances. Leadership accepts responsibility and is action-oriented. Leadership is neither a demand for power nor acquiescence to the demand. It is the experience that arises from combining two motivations. First, you create community through a commitment to an important cause or principle. Second, you organize resources to reach an endgame.

All the leadership books, articles and research in the world
cannot provide the answers. These are instruments to create dialogue and discussion and to raise more questions than answers. Focus matters. Questions need to be asked to focus leaders on accountability, self-reflection, honesty and purpose. Some examples:

- What do you want to create and contribute as an individual, a team and an organization?
- What will this vision for achievement look like?
- What will it take for you to do it?
- What are you doing right now to get there?
- What is hampering your achievement?
- What are you afraid of losing?
- What might you gain by doing something differently?

My reflections are offered in the spirit of progress. I acknowledge the new attitude to leadership and management that is now required in our dramatically shifting environment and arena of public expectations. There is a growing appetite in public service today for a more decisive and action-oriented form of leadership. There is also a deep commitment to justice, equality and citizen engagement. In order to survive, leaders must respond to this public sentiment while focusing unwaveringly on the purpose and reasons for them to be leading in the first place.

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l’attention des leaders sur la responsabilité, l’auto-réflexion, l’honnêteté et l’intention. Voici quelques exemples :

• Que désirez-vous créer et contribuer en tant qu’une personne, une équipe, une organisation ?
• À quoi ressemblera cette vision de la réussite ?
• Que vous faudra-t-il pour y parvenir ?
• Que faites-vous actuellement en ce sens ?
• Qu’est-ce qui ralentit votre réalisation ?
• Qu’avez-vous peur de perdre ?
• Que pourriez-vous gagner en faisant quelque chose différemment ?

Mes réflexions sont offertes dans l’esprit du progrès. Je reconnais la nouvelle attitude à l’égard du leadership et de la gestion qui est à présent requise dans notre environnement en profonde mutation et l’arène des attentes publiques. Il y a un appétit grandissant dans la fonction publique actuelle pour un type de leadership plus décisif et orienté vers l’action. Il y a également un engagement certain de justice, d’égalité et d’intérêt du public. Pour survivre, les leaders doivent répondre à ce sentiment public sans se détourner de leur but et des raisons qui les motivent à commander.

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