Ivory Towers and Responsible Leadership: A Challenge for Education

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Abstract:

Responsible Leadership is a concept gaining ground in the more general zeitgeist of Corporate Responsibility. However it remains to date a less-than-well defined notion, and one in which fundamental questions arise, not least, "What do we mean by Responsible Leadership?" "What is it?" "And how might we recognise it?" Assuming we can begin to answer these questions, another follows – "Do we have the educational curricula and processes in place to educate and train Responsible Leaders, and if not, how might we develop them?" Are those in Higher Education even beginning to acknowledge and recognise the need for the development of such curricula? There is no doubt that our need for Responsible Leaders in the corporate world and in society more generally is significant and challenging; as Lovins notes, "most businesses are behaving as if people were still scarce and nature still abundant... but ... now people aren't scarce ...nature is" (Lovins 2007.) And neither is becoming a Responsible Leader likely to be an easy mission to undertake; Parkin for example, asserts the need to develop "a personal sustainability-leadership model" which she says will be, "as unique as a snowflake" (Parkin 2010.) Given the scale of this challenge, from where do we expect such Responsible Leaders, capable of acknowledging and responding to fundamental shifts, and of developing their own leadership models, to materialise?

This paper examines emerging definitions of Responsible Leadership and the issues surrounding it, and drawing on data from University leaders, academics and leading edge curricula, begins to postulate as to how Higher Education Systems might begin to accommodate this burgeoning requirement. As McDaniel points out, "perhaps no greater educational challenge exists than emotionally reassociating humanity with the biosphere" (McDaniel 2005.) An important element in that process must surely be the appropriate education of Responsible Leaders.

Introduction:

"The Capitalist System is under siege," write Porter and Kramer (2011:64.) Hooray, at last the light has been switched on at the end of the tunnel! Possibly for the first time there is a burgeoning understanding that the unadulterated capitalist system, and its seemingly sole premise of 'growth' that we have been advocating for so long, is seriously flawed. Parkin (2010:157) points to 'the perversity of the global economic system that is dependent on overdosing on resources and underperforming on basic human rights,' whilst Daly (2007:28) asserts a most important premise that we "stop counting natural capital consumption as income."

Developing initiatives in Corporate Social Responsibility, once seen as a pertinent business response, are beginning to come under fire for their essentially 'PR'-driven approaches which lack integration with the central purpose of the firm. As Porter notes, "... most companies remain stuck in a 'social responsibility' mind-set in which societal issues are at the periphery, not the core" (Porter & Kramer 2011:64.) Responsible Leadership is perhaps an emerging response to this escalating lack of trust in our corporate and capitalist systems. But what does Responsible Leadership actually mean? The Oxford English Dictionary provides us with this definition of 'responsible,' - '*capable of fulfilling an obligation or duty; reliable, trustworthy, sensible[1]'* which may be less than helpful in simply replacing one morally-loaded term with several others, but we get the gist. To 'be responsible' as a leader is presumably to care; to understand the issues and further, to *seek* to understand the issues. It is perhaps to take a broader view of the situation and ultimately and most importantly to *take action* regarding the situation presenting itself. That broader notion must also include a look to the future; an understanding of the timescales and the unfolding of events therein, so that action is not simply retrospective but prospective, anticipating developments and being unafraid to change the course of events where necessary. Stakeholders are "asking business to step up" (Porter & Kramer 2011:64) and it is surely the role of the Responsible Leader to ensure that business functions with '...more effective deterrents against anti-planetary behaviour' (Ward & Dubos, 1972. 281.)

Becoming a Responsible Leader is unlikely to be an easy mission to undertake; Parkin for example, asserts the need to develop "a personal sustainability-leadership model" which she says will be, "as unique as a snowflake" (Parkin 2010:155.) Given the scale of this challenge, from where do we expect such Responsible Leaders, capable of acknowledging and responding to fundamental shifts, and of developing their own leadership models, to materialise? Indeed to demand a Responsible Leader is asking rather a lot of mankind. We have little if any historical

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[1] http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/163863?redirectedFrom=responsible#eid accessed July 12, 2011.

precedent for such a stance and little example in the consistent behaviour of any role model. We also have a hugely cynical nature with which we can easily undermine any examples of the above that we may come across. So to ask 'how to educate?' Responsible Leaders is to pose rather a difficult challenge. A good starting point may be to ask what we mean by the term Responsible Leader – to define our expectation of what and who such a person might be and to explore the characteristics we might wish such a person to possess and utilise - although we may just end up with a caricature do-gooder. A cleaner approach, perhaps simply because it de-emotionalises the debate somewhat, is to ask not 'who is a Responsible Leader?' but 'what capabilities and skill sets is a Responsible Leader likely to require?' This has the added advantage that once reasonably sure of ourselves, it is but a small leap to specify the content of an educational curricula designed to 'train' mere mortals for the hallowed task of 'Responsible Leadership. In short, it is much more useful to see Responsible Leadership as a role rather than an individual.

The Challenge for Higher Education:

The Challenge for Higher Education is how does this Responsible Leadership 'role' translate into an educational offering? A recent report[2] publicised by the Higher Education Academy in the UK finds that "sustainability concerns are significant in students' university choices" and that the vast majority of student respondees felt that sustainable development is something universities should actively incorporate and promote (Bone & Agombar 2011.) In addition they found that 80% of respondents believe that "sustainability skills are going to be important" to their future employers and that the majority of first-year students involved believe that it is "the role of universities" to prepare them for such graduate employment (op cit. 2011.) This bodes well for the curriculum development and teaching of 'sustainability issues" but doesn't in and of itself imply that the management of such institutions need take such sustainable issues on board themselves. However as the report continues, it begins to draw closer to this notion in citing that, "Senior management support within universities is essential" and that there should be a mandate for "sustainability champions from senior management groups" at each university to support the formation of a national forum to progress the thinking and delivery of the sustainability literacy agenda (op cit. 2011.)

Some empirical thoughts:

As part of this ongoing research, empirical data was gathered from practising managers/leaders in Higher Education concerning definitions of Responsible Leadership; their role as Responsible

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■ [2] First-year attitudes towards, and skills in, sustainable development. Higher Education Academy and NUS, UK Bone, E. Agombar, J. (2011).

Leaders and the prospective education of Responsible Leaders. The data so far gives rise to some interesting initial findings. The first is that there appears to be little clarity and coherence over a generic understanding of what Responsible Leadership actually 'means.' Perhaps predictable phrases emerged including:

- 'it's about fairness and informed decision making'
- 'it's to do with ...ethics.. morals....'
- 'about institutional rather than personal gain'
- 'feeling like you've earned your salary.'

However when asked about their role as Responsible Leaders much more definitive answers arose. Clear categories emerged including:

1. **Human issues: -** 'people's livelihood; family incomes; the work/life balance; employees/students;'

2. **Big society stuff: '**we are a pseudo public entity; education/outreach and the third sector.'

3. **Environment**: including how we physically deliver at an institutional level; 'carbon footprints; energy use; building efficiency; rationalising the estate and contributing to the physical environment of the city.' One director commented that although we are "building a new hall of residence on parkland, [we will be] alleviating the pressure in the city streets and communities..."

4. **Our Wider Role in the Community: '**Use our investment in the city to improve it; Access agreements – taking a proportion of students from low-income families; Residents making a living from the students.'

5. **Curriculum:** '"we are teaching the next generation of society; we must build 'consideration' into the curriculum; responsibility needs to be embedded.' The final point was reiterated with the comment, "Why have a green MBA? Why isn't your MBA green?"

More detailed discussion however suggested a certain naivety about their own lack of awareness**.** For example when asked "If you put Responsible Leadership first, as **number** one in the strategic plan, what would change?" the response from one Director was that " It would change the emphasis.... but not fundamentally." Further questions for example on the carbon footprint of international recruitment, or the air miles students clock up 'going home' had not been considered. These were questions not yet even on the agenda. A final interesting point was that in general these senior managers had never been overtly

"interviewed, questioned, or appraised on the issue of 'responsibility' or personal ethics…" But, all agreed, that there was 'an expectation that I should behave ethically.' So the question remains, as McDaniel notes, as to whether "higher education [will] acquire sufficient vision and courage to take on the daunting environmental challenges of the twenty-first century?" What is clear is that 'the adjustments required to make the transition into the next century with global civilisation intact demand formidable educational reform" (McDaniel, 2005:192.)

Defining Curricula:

There are however promising moves afoot and gaining much kudos is Harvard's MBA Oath which includes the following lines[3]:

> **"As a business leader I recognize my role in society: therefore, I promise that:**
>
> **I will refrain from** corruption, unfair competition, or **business practices harmful to society**
>
> **I will protect the right of future generations to advance their standard of living and enjoy a healthy planet.**
>
> **I will** invest in developing myself and others, helping the management profession continue to advance and **create sustainable and inclusive prosperity**.
>
> In exercising my professional duties according to these principles, **I recognize that my behavior must set an example of integrity, eliciting trust and esteem from those I serve. I will remain accountable to my peers and to society for my actions and for upholding these standards."**

It was initially devised as a kind of Hippocratic Oath, deriving from the work of Khurana and Nohria (2008), upon which the MBA students decided to draw4. It would be "a management oath [which] would outline values and ideals to which managers should commit"

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[3] The full version can be found at http://mbaoath.org/take-the-oath/
[4] See http://mbaoath.org/about/

(http://mbaoath.org/about/.) Although initially voluntary, the Economist notes that, "It will be unsurprising if, this time next year, taking the oath is compulsory rather than voluntary at Harvard, given Nitin Nohria's recent appointment as dean of its business school" (http://www.economist.com/node/16208000?story_id=16208000.) The Responsible Leaders are perhaps on the rise! It is also worth noting that included in the Harvard MBA curricula are modules on *Leadership & Corporate Accountability* – notably, this is 'required curriculum;' *Power and Influence* which is described as 'develop[ing] your own strategy for developing and exercising power and influence ethically and responsibly in your career' and '*The Moral Leader*:' 'designed to encourage students to ...come to terms with their own definition of moral leadership and how it can be translated into action' (http://www.hbs.edu/mba/.)

Other leading edge business schools are beginning to follow suit in (re-)defining their curricula to take account of these new 'value-based' criteria. As Khurana and Nohria note, 'in the face of the recent institutional breakdown of trust in business, managers are losing legitimacy. To regain public trust, management need to become a true profession...' (Khurana, Nohria 2008:70) A major step in re-establishing that legitimacy over the medium to longer term is surely to better educate managers and leaders. What follows, from the research to date, is a formulation of what such an education might comprise.

What Capabilities/Skill Sets does a Responsible Leader require?

- **Synthetic thinking** ie/ the ability to synthesise large quantities of discrete and perhaps wholly unrelated data and subjective opinion. This might link to creative thinking skills. Synthesis and Creativity involve new modes of thinking which might include: right brain thinking; whole brain thinking; soft systems methodologies; rich pictures; or simply stop thinking like you used to because the world has changed and so must your cognitive approach. As Edward Land once remarked, "people who seem to have had a new idea have often simply stopped having an old idea" (Lovins 1999:148.) The thinking mechanisms of 'responsible leaders' is fertile ground in the literature and the calls for novel thinking are many and varied. Daly notes that, 'developing an economy that can be sustained within the finite biosphere requires new ways of thinking' (Daly 2007, 12.) Product designer Alexander Manu goes further and asserts that "Responsible design must be shaped by an ideal" and that, he says, will help us "instil some moral passion and a sense of purpose... we will make idealism legitimate once again." (Manu quoted Margolin 1997, 88.)

- **Informed risk-taking**. No matter how much data, subjective or otherwise, is synthesised we can be fairly sure that 'the right answer' will still be slow to emerge where issues of potential environmental/moral/social damage may be set to occur. The ability to make the

best decision or take the best action in situations of uncertainty therefore becomes a pre-requisite skill. To do that, an understanding of risk management is fundamental; or perhaps more specifically, eco-risk management. Working on the basis that preserving the planet is probably a priority, perhaps we should focus a little here. Risk is generally not well understood (witness the recent financial meltdowns.) Even at the most basic, axes of high probability/low probability and high/low impact curves and their influence on the resulting risk situation seem to be less than explicit. Add in timeframes, particularly with reference to Sustainability:- 'its going to be dire in a hundred billion years' (cosmologists tend to be good at this) may require a different level of attention to 'it's getting a little bit worse every five minutes but not so much that we notice it day by day.' Returning ten years later, we find scenario a) still stands unchanged. Scenario b) however – not the initial attention grabber - has probably moved past some tipping point or other which we were too busy to 'notice' along the way. Understanding 'risk' is both complex and crucial.

- **Generating/utilising extensive networks of data/advice provision** and being able to determine which consistently provide the greatest degree of 'reliability.' In a system where 'truth' and 'authority' no longer have parlance in that they can rarely if ever be ascertained or verified, being able to perceive where the 'best/least subjective/optimal' available data and advice is to be had is a skill in its own right. 'Trust' is a hugely valuable commodity and one typically underpriced in the business and management worlds. "If you google 'What is truth?' you find reference to St John's Gospel and 556 million other results. Protecting academic rigour [and the planet] when there are half a billion references is a daunting task" (Craven 2011.) Knowing what to believe and when to trust – is more so.

- **Leading on the basis of parachutes not altimeters** (Daly 2007) that is, being able to take a broad brush view of a scenario large or small, and perceive which of a number of parameters will have the greatest effect and in what timespan. Waiting for the most accurate data (continually reading the altimeter) typically results in hitting the ground before leaving the burning plane. In our search for the 'best/latest/most accurate data,' which can take a number of guises - continually referring to the altimeter; getting a new altimeter brought in; getting another consultancy firm to read the same altimeter or even build one to their own specification first and then read it, etc. - we may miss the event/tipping point/environmental disaster as it happens. Bring on the parachutes, the functional escape mechanism, and probably wear one at all times.

- **Not allowing the frog to boil – or being the frog -** commonly referred to as 'environmental sensitivity' in management speak although that doesn't quite read right in this context! Warm water is still comfortable but reading your risk curve at that point should put you outside your comfort zone fairly quickly. Look at the thermometer once if you must, and reach for the parachute. This is about being able to perceive when change is endemic despite appearances and when damage is beginning to occur, in order to remedy the situation before crisis: in essence, spotting the tipping points before we've passed them. A prospective understanding is usually more helpful than a retrospective one.

- **A commitment to 'do the right thing'** – whatever that may be. It's usually not as 'unclear' as people tend to allow it to be. Most of the time, morally, we know what this is - it's typically just difficult to call. Do it anyway. Do it as default. Be responsible.

- **Personal resilience and reflection.** Learning on the job is crucial, so being resilient enough to take the heat, and learn from it at a deeply personal level is fundamental (see Parkin 2010.) In Parkin's' model of sustainability-literate leadership, she advocates the development of four habits of thought:
    - **Resilience** - Am I enhancing the strength of the system?
    - **Relationships** – Am I creating/protecting them?
    - **Reflection** – Am I thinking/learning?
    - **Reverence** – Am I demonstrating a respectful awe? (Parkin 2010.)

It would be an interesting challenge to develop the curricula that can 'teach' these things, but any number of experiential learning models would give us some starting points. 'On the job' training and work-based learning schemes would doubtless help. Measuring personal resilience? Well that's probably a matter for personal reflection.

- **An intellectual humility which accommodates and facilitates a recognition of, and subservience to, the inherent supremacy of Nature.** In short, without this planet and her generic life support systems, we have nowhere to go, so this is really the only sensible stance given the risks involved. The curricula is probably fairly straightforward and might comprise a reading list of everything Rachel Carson has ever written, for example. Remaining in doubt after completing such a task would simply be perversity.

- **Knowing that Capitalism is highly flawed and must be changed.** As Daly has put so eloquently, the economy exists within the environment, not the other way around. "Currently it seems that we are witnessing the conflict between a physical impossibility

(continual growth) and a political impossibility (limiting growth). But in the long run the physically impossible is more impossible than the merely politically impossible…. But we may have to suffer a bit before that becomes clear." (Daly 2007:11.) Thankfully, Herman Daly has written most of the curriculum content here already. After that, trying to rationalise the position of any mainstream Corporate Strategist thinker with maintaining long term planetary health should be the convincing blow.

- **TAKING ACTION.** All of the above points engender this one. An overwhelmed leader, defeated by data and indecision into helplessness is of no use. Particularly when their soft skills are sufficiently good as to hide such stasis for even a short period, allowing the rest of the organisation/world to 'carry on as normal' in a state of misinformed security. It is a point reinforced in a Financial Times article; 'We need leadership that respects the planetary boundaries of life. We've gone too far in a dangerous direction. Now we know enough. To act now' (FT 2008.)

That's probably not a complete list, but it makes a good start. Remember this is a role, not a person, which is positive as it allows us the scope to 'develop' and 'train' people for such a role, rather than simply declaring that we can't find any 'like that, out there.' Taking each of the above requirements, we can formulate an overview of a Responsible Leadership education curriculum, which falls sagaciously into three interlinking categories: Underpinning Philosophies; Skill Sets and Capabilities. The final assessment should be defined by the ability and propensity to take Action!

Proposed Curricula for Responsible Leadership:

MODULES: MSc Responsible Leadership	Philosophies	Skill Sets	Capabilities	Assessment
	Intellectual humility and Nature's supremacy	Synthesis and Creativity.	Networks of data and advice provision	
	Capitalism is highly flawed	Doing the right thing	Risk management	
		Personal resilience and reflection	Environmental Sensitivity (FROGS)	
			Parachutes not altimeters	
				ACT.

What is significant here is that the emphasis is less on content and more on skills and capabilities. There is no set syllabus of knowledge that we can simply comprehensively impart – there are too many unknowns; indeed it is unlikely that we have sufficient information to do so. Change is so pervasive and fast-moving in the environmental sphere and in our understanding of 'sustainability,' such that this approach is rendered useless. What we need to 'teach' is a set of approaches and the means to think through the issues and understand, at least at a broad brush level, the risks involved and ultimately impart the ability to act. Even when assailed of the 'facts,' many managers remain helpless in the face of such challenge and simply 'don't know what to do differently on Monday' (Parkin 2010:2.) What may be unprecedented in this education, if this sounds like simply another MBA, are the levels of data, the degree of uncertainty, the level of risk over exceptional timeframes and the pace at which the implications change all on a scale hereto unknown – a planetary scale. An interesting example to note is that we have used as much plastic in the last 10 years as we did in the century before that (Jones 2011.) Despite that colossal growth, drawing on one of the most heavily-utilised and scarcest of our natural resources, we have made little effort to recover the resultant waste stream. Plastic may become the gold of the future – and we may be mining for it – in our own landfill sites!

Conclusions:

If indeed, 'a world without growth has become politically unthinkable,' (Daly, 2007:10) then the challenge to change this view rests heavily on better and more enlightened education of our business managers and leaders. However, it is a complex landscape. We already know that the

economic environment will, in forty to fifty years time, be unrecognizable compared to what we know today. It is beginning to be routinely touted that we have only one generation in which to make the transition from a high carbon economy to a low carbon economy. However within that context, we have the driving forces of 'capitalism,' 'consumerism,' and 'growth' which apparently remain unhindered to date, by a 'non-growing' planet. We have the complex and multi-dimensional demands and expectations of shareholders and stakeholders, of poverty alleviation and 'development.' Resolving these multi-faceted and often conflicting demands is where the challenges of Responsible Leadership lie. What is clear is that Responsible Leadership is not going to be pigeonholed, but will remain as broad-based and multifarious as the issues it must address. That situation is already prevalent in the enlightened business world with companies such as Marks and Spencer and Ricoh taking very serious steps towards Responsible Leadership. It is however currently less than coherent in the curricula of our business schools. If 'perhaps no greater educational challenge exists than emotionally reassociating humanity with the biosphere' (McDaniel 2005) then we need to remedy that situation and soon. An important element in that process must surely be the appropriate education of Responsible Leaders.

Rachel Carson in writing her scenario-changing book, Silent Spring (1962), clearly advocated the need for responsibility in leadership, then talking of pesticide use in species control. In an earlier book, Under the Sea-Wind (1941) Carson again alludes to 'responsibility' although perhaps in a more indirect way. She writes of species population control under natural mechanisms:

> "Each of the roe fish would shed in season more than a hundred thousand eggs. From these perhaps only one or two young would survive the perils of river and sea and return in time to spawn, for by such ruthless selection the species are kept in check…" (Carson R. 1941. 17.)

Humanity, of course, has no such natural predators, but perhaps a greater gift – we have intelligent, rational thinking and more, we have the ability to apply morals and understand the ethics of our decision-making processes and the resultant decisions. We have then, in the absence of natural predators, the opportunity to be our own delimiting force, not just with regard to population control but in much broader terms, to keep our own species "in check." In order to take up that challenge across a myriad of fronts, we need to educate and to lead in appropriate ways: we need Responsible Leaders, and we need them very soon.

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