DOES LEADERSHIP BS IMPACT YOU?

Use your leadership 'BS' detector to avoid 'snake oil'

1. What qualifications does your leadership provider have in business / organisational leadership? It is amazing how many people don't have relevant qualifications – and how many have no qualifications at all!

2. What research base (academic/ scientific disciples) is your leadership provider drawing on? You'll find plenty of examples of people just waking up one morning and packaging their ideas with plenty of sizzle. Sadly, people are often buy sizzle rather than substance. But, when the sizzle's gone, there's nothing of true value to work with. There never was!

Also, it's not enough to simply have 'been there'. In so many areas, great 'players' don't necessarily make great coaches. Leaders who are teaching others should be able to provide an evidence-base for their own experiences.

3. Does your provider focus on attributes or behaviours? There are many different leader attributes that can be successful. Ultimately though, it's not the attributes that count, it's specific leadership skills and behaviours that are right for the organisation and context! Is this what your people are learning from your leadership provider?

Leadership 'BS'?

Jeffrey Pfeffer's new book, 'Leadership BS' is provocative! Yet, as early book reviews seem to agree, it is also refreshingly honest. The extremely experienced and well-qualified Stanford Graduate School Professor of Organizational Behaviour laments "a world with too many leadership failures, too many career derailments and too many toxic workplaces".

Part of Pfeffer's academic responsibilities over the years has included leadership classes for very experienced postgraduate students. As a respected business thinker and researcher, he is also a regular keynote speaker on leadership at conferences and a consultant to senior executives.

Time and again, he reflects, people comment that his perspective on leadership is quite different from many others. He also notes the very many who also share with him the "huge disconnect" they experience between "what the leadership industry tells them to do" and what actually works in practise!

Pfeffer's observation is that a lot of leadership training is based on hope rather than reality, and "on wishes rather than data". He shines the spotlight brightly on the myriad of so-called 'leadership experts' who hang out their shingle to practise, often with a lot of sizzle, but no real substance!

Using a medical comparison

Pfeffer compares the current leadership industry to medicine in the US in the early 1900's. Pretty much anyone could practise medicine as no license was required. Untested and unproven "cures" were the order of the day. A good example of the two combined is the dubiously credentialed travelling 'doctor' with his fake cures, sold using a lot of marketing spin, based on pseudo-scientific evidence. Some of these charlatans were a little more sophisticated still, with an accomplice in the crowd claiming a cure and perhaps buying more of the 'snake oil', to trick others into doing the same.

Many medical schools too were focused more on financial gain than on promoting medical science or evaluating the impact that their training had on patients. But among these were excellent doctors and researchers who were committed to improving medicine. An extensive review of the field in 1910 resulted in a major shakeup. A significant number of medical schools closed, doctors required a license, and the practice of medicine was placed on a scientific, biomedical foundation.

BS in the leadership industry

Returning to leadership, Pfeffer points out that achieving 'guru' status comes a lot more from modern social media than from a solid grounding in scientific research. Doing a TED talk, blogging voraciously, building a massive Twitter following have, in themselves, have become substitutes for evidence-based research and qualifications.

Pfeffer's concerning conclusion is that "the leadership industry has failed". He suggests that recommendations and prescriptions relating to leaders being authentic, serving others, being modest, showing empathy and displaying emotional intelligence may seem sensible enough. But, despite billions of dollars of investment and an ever-growing industry, they don't seem to deliver much demonstrable improvement in leadership efficacy.

The evidence Pfeffer's cites is the very low engagement of workers, the increasing number 'toxic' workplaces, and large number of staff who say they'd rather be working somewhere else. Leaders too are in a bad way. Tenure is falling. In Australia for example, 'The Australian' reported an average CEO tenure of just 4.3 years (down from 7 years in 2010). Leaders are also more likely to face career-derailment and even getting sacked.

What is the focus of this leadership BS?

A look at the index of Leadership BS shows a distinct pattern to Pfeffer's criticisms – all relate in some way to qualities or attributes. First off, he questions the centrality of inspiration. While it's certainly popular to look for leadership programs that 'inspire', he asserts that innovative, rigorous, and scientifically grounded programs are likely to deliver far better value. He also points out that often leaders with experience write about inspirational leadership yet, while they were in charge, that's not what their people saw. Bill George, author of 'True North', is one example among many, and Jack Welch another. Pfeffer suggests the industry needs to move beyond 'hero leadership'!

Another criticism is the suggestion that leaders should be modest, even though there is little evidence of the quality being widespread, especially in large organisations. Pfeffer's point is that modesty is actually quite rare, and that there is a lot more evidence that being less modest serves leaders better. As with all Pfeffer's commentary, it's not about what we'd wish and hope to see in leaders, but rather how it actually is, right now!

In similar vein, Pfeffer also points out that: authenticity is misunderstood and over-rated; on the whole, leaders often don't tell the whole truth (and research shows that, out of necessity for harmony, most people don't anyway); that organisations are moving forward even though trust is scarce; leaders actually 'eat first', because that's how the system works; leaders care for themselves!

What is the approach to leadership in your organisation and does it reflect sizzle or substance?