



KNOW THYSELF: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON LEADERSHIP



Monika Szunejko says the lessons of leadership are both evolutionary and revolutionary but, really, it's about finding your place in the world.

I attended the 2002 Aurora Leadership Institute shortly after returning to Australia to work in academic libraries. Since that time, I've moved out of academic libraries and the lessons of the Institute have been a slow burn – smoldering and ever-present and just hot enough to make me take notice when I need to understand a situation, an interaction, or become conscious of what I am learning.

Since turning 21 (in library years) last year, I've been considering those lessons, and reflecting on what leadership means for me.

The lessons of leadership are mostly evolutionary, but sometimes revolutionary. My knowledge and understanding of some issues has grown incrementally, while at other times I have been challenged and had to radically re-think my understanding of a situation or problem. The lessons of leadership are as much a personal evolution as a professional one and the lessons can be painful as much as joyous. The lessons can be insightful, revelatory, and often challenging.

I recall being deeply offended and saddened when a mentor told me that one of the lessons of leadership is in developing scars and calluses ('war wounds' if you will) and that developing a thickened skin is part of the personal protection you need to develop to remain focused and not be diverted by personal injury. Perhaps this is a lesson about resilience, and remaining true to a vision. Perhaps it is a lesson that is difficult to learn because it's about subjugating your personal pain to a greater good.

Mostly, leadership is about taking risks – it is knowing that sometimes you'll get it right and sometimes you'll get it wrong, and that the trust you develop with your colleagues sees you through both of those times. And that's the thing about leadership – it's not a solo act. Leadership is about encouraging others to be leaders – to encourage them to step forward and place their own stick in the sand. It is about modeling behaviours, stating a vision, leading by example, demonstrating that anyone can and should innovate, and creating an environment where anyone can lead. That just turning up and clocking on is not enough.

Chiseled into the limestone walls of the walkway between the Arts Building and the Library at the University of Western Australia is the aphorism "Know Thyself". I must have walked past these words hundreds of times during my studies and unknowingly they also became chiseled into my subconscious.

Because I've learned that leadership is about personal integrity, and building a culture of integrity among your colleagues. Leadership is about self-knowledge and self-discovery.

Leadership is about placing yourself in the world, seeing where you fit in, and what you can do to make it better.

Leadership is about identifying your position in the world – observing yourself, and taking the opportunities you have to create change for good.

Leadership is not merely a mirror which you reflect back on yourself, it is not a narcissistic experience. Leadership is more like a window through which you see the world and catch glimpses of your reflection superimposed on the world as the light changes. Leadership is about your connection to other people.

Leadership comes from within – it is not about a position, or about status, or about a pay-packet. It is about seeing a gap and stepping forward to fill it. Leadership is observing your environment, identifying goals, seeing a need, stating a vision, communicating clearly, sharing the vision, building support and taking steps to move towards attaining that vision.

Know your strengths, know your limitations, know your weaknesses, know your passion, know your colleagues, know how your work and your life fit together, know how you fit into your workplace, know your personal values, know where you will draw the line, know when to stay, know when to leave, know when to fight, know when to fold.

Know thyself.

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