

## Empathy & Emerging Leadership

I am amazed that 20 years have passed since we founded Schneider~Ross. Then, we were a fresh faced newly married couple with an “of its own time” taste in 80’s style specs. And now? Faces a bit less fresh perhaps - and contact lenses for me; trendy hearing specs for him.

We have witnessed a seismic shift in attitudes and beliefs on inclusion and diversity in the last 20 years, and once I have got over my embarrassment of visibly sharing a timeline with two of my all time heroes - Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama, I can sense that I do feel as optimistic about the next 20 years, as I felt back in 1989.

### I was asked the question “what next?”

I believe that we will see a new kind of leadership emerging, “phoenix like,” from the ashes of the current global financial crisis. It is one where a highly prized capability will be **empathy**. It may not feature in more than a handful of leadership competency frameworks just now – but I believe, increasingly, it will do.

A complete absence of empathy is one characteristic of the “psychopathic leadership” that Binna Kandola referred to in his article on leaders in the financial sector. [Management Today, 26<sup>th</sup> February 2009]

<http://www.managementtoday.co.uk/news/883246/were-big-banks-run-psychopaths>

I believe that a lack of empathy in some of our leaders caused them to fail to listen – to ignore signs and messages from their people who were trying to tell them that all was not well with the

high risk, bonus driven sales culture of their companies.

Empathy is a skill that many leaders I work with as an executive coach, want to develop – the ability to understand at a deep level, how and why the other person feels, thinks and behaves. To grow our capacity for empathy as leaders, we need to hone our skills at building strong rapport, stepping into another’s shoes, listening deeply and being curious about another’s point of view.

Empathy is essential to engaging at a deeper level with employees and colleagues – and with customers of course. It is particularly important in successfully relating and engaging with people who are different from you – perhaps someone from a different cultural background, or someone who is gay if you are straight.

And in the newly emerging leadership culture, buying engagement through purely bonus led motivation will no longer work, or wash with the shift in values taking place. Leaders will need to develop their ability to motivate by transformational not transactional leadership.

I hope that Schneider~Ross’ work on diversity and inclusion - and within it my own passion for coaching current and future leaders on empathy and engagement - will continue to contribute (in a modest way) to the shaping of our working lives.

I pay tribute to all of those who are embarked on our shared journey of creating organisation cultures that are inclusive and fair - and which are just great fun places to work!

*by Rachael Ross, May 2009*