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Awakening Leadership Within

RIGHT ACTION

"I am the owner of my actions (kamma), heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and have my actions as my arbitrator. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir¹..."

Our culture is geared to taking action. This value appears in our politics and movies as well as in business. The star is an "action hero" who is aggressive and responds immediately and forcefully to events. We orient around taking action. In business we schedule most meetings to determine who will be taking what actions and we respect those leaders who are "decisive" in their actions. We drive to action, to results, to solutions and to performance. Clearly we must get results for business to be successful. What I question is the thinking that drives the actions.

There is, however, a distinction between taking action and taking right action. For Buddhists, right action is the Fourth Truth of the Noble Eightfold Path that includes right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. Studying the concepts behind this tradition is valuable as it can be interpreted as an alignment and path towards leading with integrity and wisdom.

Peter Block, a well known management consultant and philosopher, in his article entitled "Changing our thinking about action"² makes a distinction in the concept of "action". "Something shifts when we differentiate between **decisive** action and what we might call **profound** action. Profound action is about our way of thinking, our way of being with those immediately around us, and the nature of the conversations we engage in. Profound action exists in contrast to decisive action, where we choose to spend or save money, build or eliminate a structure, pick or refuse a destination."

As an example, recently we worked with an organization on strategic planning. The direction they intended to take was explained and we were tasked to help them create a strategy to get certain results. We used a method called "action learning" with this group. Action learning can best be described as a specific process that forces a group to fully understand a

¹ Upajjhatthana Sutta: Subjects for Contemplation. Translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu
<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/sacca4/samma-ditthi/kamma.html>

² http://www.linkageinc.com/newsletter/archives/od/change_block.shtml Article for Linkage Inc. newsletter



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problem before moving towards its solution. The assumption in most planning or problem solving processes is that everyone believes that they are working on the same problem. Because action learning rules are based on inquiry (statements can only be made in response to a question) versus the common method of advocacy it causes the group to shift into truly listening to the individuals in the group. When each individual was asked to define the problem they were solving we discovered that each person was solving a different problem. During the course of two days this group began to understand one another in relationship to the problem they were trying to solve. Through inquiry they agreed on what the problem actually was. Through reflection and the valuing of all perspectives a breakthrough occurred. If they had followed the traditional way of problem solving they would have moved quickly into action spending considerable resources in solving different problems, or rehashing old problems, without ever solving the right problem or considering the impact of the problem and its solutions on the industry and the community where the organization was located.

Management books and business magazines are filled with the next big action or process. Maybe if we do this, we can solve that. In the interest of "doing something," we hurl new techniques at old problems hoping that this time, we will solve something. That's the easy part though. The difficult part lies in the conversation before the action. The conversation is the most powerful component of a potential solution. It is the way we have the conversation that will predict the outcome.

Without having honesty and inclusiveness in our conversations we will never see the truth or understand the many ways that truth is manifest for our employees, customers or stakeholders. But like the Emperor's new clothes, the CEO often does not hear or see the truth. He or she may only be privy to the superficial conversation and is left vulnerable to exposure. We often see the same issues cycle back periodically perhaps in different guises. The management fad of the moment is hurled at the issue with promises that this time it will be different. And the credibility of the leadership is diminished once again when the results are the same as before.

Without regard to the entire system, changes made in one area typically adversely affect others. Because of the drive to a solution, you may not be hearing the whole story. As the CEO your role as "Chief Conversationalist" is to create an environment for honest dialogue that orients around what is truly meaningful to you and to the organization.

Reflection is essential to leadership. Yet our culture with its pressure to move to action diminishes a leader's ability to reflect sufficiently, to breathe in the complexity of any action. Block advocates a larger perspective, a "shift

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in what matters" before taking action. "What problem solving and "decisiveness" miss is that change is about consciousness. It is about our capacity to reflect on our experience and see it in a different way...When we include consciousness as a powerful action step in times of crisis, we would start to value reflection. We would take time to think. We would question the limitations of our own worldview. We would value wondering what events mean to us, rather than how to manage events. We would accept the idea that if we wish to change the world we first must change our mind. This puts thought and our thinking at the center of action. It carries the insight that seeing our role in creating the world is the essence of being awake and being really in charge."³

Is it such a stretch to believe that business is interdependent with the community and society? Can actions then manifest this belief as a reality, not merely a concept or intellectual exercise? In Peter Senge's book *Presence*, Betty Sue, one of the participants in the dialogue makes a powerful observation. She inquires, "The key is to see the different future not as inevitable, but as one of several genuine possibilities. Maybe if people really believed we could be headed for extinction, we would do collectively what many people do individually when they know they may actually die – we would see our lives clearly."⁴ When we actually incorporate the idea that our actions impact the world we focus on what is essential and meaningful and eliminate the rest. This makes available right action.

To move into right or profound action requires a shift in language as well as thinking. The same level of conversation will maintain the mediocrity to which we have become accustomed. Acknowledging our role in the dynamic allows us to ask how we may have contributed to the problem. Block calls this the "language of reconciliation".

Leaders can harness the collective wisdom to make a difference not only in their organizations but also in the world. To consider the collective wisdom and focus on the quality of our relationships and the underlying purpose of our actions is to move into right action. This provides the possibility that each individual can make his or her unique contribution to the solution based on commitment to the whole.

Yes, business requires decisive action. Yet the opportunity exists for your leadership to be expansive and to affect more than the transactions of business with right or profound action as a foundation for decisive action.

³ http://www.linkageinc.com/newsletter/archives/od/change_block.shtml Article for Linkage Inc. newsletter

⁴ Presence by Peter Senge, pg. 25



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You must ask yourself, "For the sake of what am I doing this?" Truly, take a moment and ask yourself this question. You may have lost sight of why you do what you do. Or maybe, you have not considered that your role as CEO has the potential of impacting more than your organization.

Peter Block concludes his article saying, "When we have gathered for the sake of a conversation for profound action, we are foundation building. You might say we are creating a spiritual foundation, which becomes the basis for real accomplishment. It is on this foundation that decisive action can change the world. Without this foundation, problem solving and traditional decisiveness is a defense against change. It insures that tomorrow will look exactly like today, and we have unconsciously chosen habit and convention over transformation. Profound action, which recognizes the power of consciousness, relationships and language, creates a new context within which decisiveness and problem solving can play a key role in giving us the future we desire."⁵

The real question is, "What is the future you desire?" Your role as leader implies that you are the "Chief Conversationalist" that envisions, articulates and executes that future. You can choose right action by modeling and valuing reflection and inclusion as much as action and individuality. After all, you are the "heir to your actions" but so are the people that follow you.

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