Leadership Lessons from Mugabe?

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Robert Mugabe's disastrous leadership of his country, Zimbabwe, has attracted significant news coverage over the last year or so. With the consistently negative image we get of Mugabe, who would have thought we could learn anything from his leadership style? But we can. Mugabe's leadership of Zimbabwe illustrates how ineffective leadership can create poor use of resources and waste, both economical and social, and ultimately lead to sub-optimal end-results – in effect, a manifestation of *leadership failure*. This is the exact opposite of what effective leadership should achieve so there are lessons here for us in the engineering profession – not least, in how to avoid ineffective leadership. And this applies as much to the Engineering Director as it does to the graduate-entry engineer leading his first project.

Mugabe shows us how a strong leader can have a solid grip on his people, even if that entails exploiting the infrastructure at his disposal to achieve mass following. But, sadly, he also illustrates how this leadership ability can be wrongly applied. In a business sense the same holds true. *Authentic* and sustainable leadership can not be taken forcefully; instead it is created by people being prepared to follow down a particular path, even if that path is not clear-cut. Hence effective business leaders must be able to harness their leadership abilities to get people behind them. And, where necessary, effective managers may also have to exploit other tools or infrastructure at their disposal to get their message across and achieve their objectives through their people. All of this is what effective leadership is really about.

A key implication for us in the engineering profession is recognising that to be really successful, it is almost as important to be an effective leader as it is to be technically competent. This point is particularly poignant considering that one of the work challenges recently highlighted by a poll of engineering professionals was whether engineering is becoming more about "managing" than about "hands-on technical work". In the modern-day workplace it is ineffective to focus on the technical elements of our work and ignore the intangible or 'softer' aspects, and leadership competency is right at the heart of these 'soft elements'. Crucially, engineers must be able to identify the appropriate resources required to achieve their objectives and adequately marshal those resources towards the objectives. This is how we deliver sustained value to our organisations.

In most cases we already do this almost unknowingly. Perhaps the intangible nature of 'leadership' causes us to be less aware of this. Most organisations today have many projects and initiatives competing for a share of the finite funding and resources available. So it becomes vital that priorities are properly identified and resources are utilised effectively and efficiently. Our most valuable resources are people – our employees and work colleagues, suppliers, customers, etc., and our relationships with these people are the 'connections' we have with them. Now, I realise that most large companies over-use this assertion – almost every FTSE200 company report contains these famous words, "...our people are our greatest asset…" Yet as soon as there is any sign of financial difficulties that same "greatest asset" is what companies jettison first via redundancies!

That notwithstanding, people *really* are an organisation's greatest resource, because that's exactly what organisations are – interconnections of people. Our ability as professionals to recognise this and tap into it is vital to our success on any project, strategic initiative or even on routine

operational activities. And managing our relationships with people, including our bosses, subordinates, peers, customers and suppliers, is a key trait of effective leadership.

As engineering professionals we must recognise that managing our resources effectively is not separate from our technical work, instead it is integral to our work portfolio in the world we live and work in today. In the early days of industrialisation it was easy, and perhaps appropriate, to separate management or leadership from technical work, as demonstrated by F. W. Taylor in his studies of management and work methods. However, things are radically different today – effective leadership is now part and parcel of working successfully, especially where 'work' entails acquiring and utilising valuable resources such as capital, people, equipment or time. So we best learn to be just as competent at leadership as we are technically.

Most of us typically think of leadership as pertaining to line management or man-management. It is true that a significant aspect of leadership relates to how well we manage our direct subordinates or our immediate teams. But effective leadership also entails a number of other important elements, such as being aware of who our key stakeholders are, within and outside our immediate functions and organisations; proactively nurturing our relationships with such stakeholders; cutting through the obfuscation that commonly hampers progress, in order to focus clearly on our key objectives and deliverables; thinking strategically about the possible future direction and challenges of our projects, functions or businesses, while simultaneously addressing today's challenges; taking time to reflect upon and plan for our own developmental needs; spending time and effort to develop our personnel; identifying the key process and technology enablers we require to be successful; identifying and addressing system- and process-deficiencies hampering our success; and, importantly, continuously communicating our progress, difficulties and successes to relevant parties. This list is not exhaustive but simply serves to illustrate the

breadth of issues an effective leader must consider in addition to his or her focus on the 'technical' elements of the job.

The tendency to ignore such aspects and focus purely on the technical aspects of a job is one that besets many professions. Engineers are no worse in this regard than purchasing or finance professionals for example. Yet engineers, more so than many other professionals, need to master leadership competences to sustain the critical role we play in driving technological innovation and ultimately developing new products, systems and applications for the benefit of society at large. Many of the outputs of the engineering profession have formed the bedrock of modern human evolution and technological development, for example the jet engine, telecommunications and even the now ubiquitous iPod. Engineers are only able to bring these innovations to market or to mass utilisation by navigating through a myriad of challenges, and we are only able to do this successfully by utilising effective leadership skills. I am fairly sure that if the lead engineer responsible for the development and introduction of the iPod had adopted a purely 'technical' focus that product would not be so widely available today!

Admittedly, the degree of leadership competency needed depends on the nature of an engineer's specific role. For example, an engineer working in a process improvement team, with colleagues from Manufacturing and Quality, is likely to require and adopt a different leadership style from, say, an engineer leading other engineers on a new product development project. The style of leadership likely to be most effective is influenced by a number of factors including the specific role, the individual, the task or objective being targeted and the particular situation – for example, we may find ourselves moving between a delegating; participating; coaching; or directing leadership style, each one of which can be just as effective depending on the situation.

These factors indicate the need to be flexible in our leadership approaches without detracting from our overall effectiveness. Being effective is paramount; we must be effective first, before trying to be efficient, otherwise we risk expending valuable resources wastefully. Effectiveness is about *doing the right thing* and this is a fundamental element of leadership. It is far better to do the right thing inefficiently than to do the wrong thing efficiently. Perhaps this gives us a useful and relevant pointer: as engineers we are trained to do things scientifically and we typically do things which are measurable, just as efficiency can be measured by comparing input to output, whereas leadership effectiveness by its very nature is not easily measurable and can be fairly subjective in many situations – does our conventional engineering training make us less amenable to something that is intrinsically difficult to measure?

I don't know the answer to this question, but I expect there will be many views on this. In many ways the answer is not so important, as it does not detract from the need for us to embrace effective leadership as an integral element of our engineering jobs, whether we are recently-qualified graduate engineers or chief executives of large multinationals. Our leadership competency not only influences our ability to deliver results and deliver them efficiently, but also significantly affects our career development. Whether we like it or not, the world of work has changed radically from what it was decades ago and we have to evolve as well.

Today most people's jobs involve a degree of the 'softer elements' which can sometimes be distinct from the more technical aspects, but both aspects are important and we must be competent across both. For us in the engineering profession this may become more critical as more activities in the 'technical' domain are outsourced and relocated to low-cost countries. This trend is likely to continue, so we may find that our ability to effectively manage our connections to outsource 'work partners' and other stakeholders becomes the vital element of success, perhaps even more so than our technical expertise.