

The Blind Tour Guide: Leadership in the New Economy

Imagine, if you will, that you are arriving for the first time in Singapore on a special holiday package, with your own individual tour guide as part of the package. You arrive at the airport, and there, as promised, is your tour guide. He is tall, about 50 years old, and very distinguished looking, but he is almost completely blind. He first started going blind in 1968, the year he graduated from tour guiding school, the year of flower power in California and student revolts in Paris, before man ever got to the Moon. Before you gird up your loins for an assault on your tour operator for short-changing you, imagine two more small things. First, you live in a world where all tour guides start going blind as soon as they graduate, and second, you live in a world that accords great respect and deference to tour guides. You never ever question a tour guide's ability to show you around.

In what circumstances could this tour guide be helpful to you in getting to know the fine city of Singapore? He has not seen most of its current landmarks, and his geography of the island will only be hazy at best. Our traditional image of the tour guide's role as being one of lead, point and talk will be severely challenged. Perhaps, we venture, this tour guide could be useful at least in telling us about how Singapore used to be, and we could lead our guide, look and listen, and imagine a Singapore long gone by. We still feel short changed, but heck, tour guides deserve all the respect they can get.

Reflecting further, we find that we must talk to this tour guide. We must tell him what we see, in order for him to illuminate us as to the history of the place we are in. We suddenly find him adept at listening, and at questioning us. We are describing a visually rich environment to a blind man, and we find that we are acquiring a sharper eye for detail, a deeper perception of what we see as we describe it for him. And in his questions and his responses, we find that he is sharing with us the perceptions and reactions of thirty-two years worth of visitors to this spot. His blindness, quite suddenly, seems to be an asset.

The tour guide who starts going blind as soon as he graduates, is, of course, the manager and corporate leader. In an age of discontinuity and change, the metaphor of blindness does not seem too extreme. We live in an age where kids know more and learn faster from knowledge-based infrastructure, than their teachers do. Many adults will remember their first struggles with learning new hand-eye motor

coordination skills in manipulating a mouse – many more adults, senior executives among them, have not yet mastered this basic skill. Children suckled on Nintendo and computer games look at them in wonderment as they struggle and curse like clumsy bears in a lightweight environment that seems totally natural to them. The visual literacy of students weaned on MTV surpasses by far our own. I am forty. I still remember being disconcerted at the age of eight by our family's first television set – the year, strangely enough, was 1968. The woman getting out of the car disappears and in a flash is sitting at a restaurant table eating dinner, and I am confused because my whole life long so far, the world has revolved around me in long, continuous panning and zooming sequences. The flickering between man's face and woman's face at dinner, fragmentary shots of restaurant scenes that do not satisfy my curiosity, and inexplicable leaps in space time, leave me bewildered and faintly seasick.

Even the MTV generation is becoming old hat as the visual media become faster and more fragmentary. Kids of today can "read" information and messages off these new media better and faster than even twenty-year olds, and my hat has long been thrown into the ring. I cannot compete. In 1971, it was considered revolutionary to cut TV commercials to a mere thirty seconds. Today in Singapore, we average anything between ten and twenty seconds per commercial, and that is considered pedestrian. Those who are in the buzz think that four to eight second commercials are the most hip.

Computer-literate youngsters read differently from book-literate managers. Screen reading is butterfly-like, flitting and scanning the information surface, picking out highlights, and dwelling momentarily on details. Book reading is linear, continuous, and invites rational chaining and sequencing of thoughts, more sustained attention and engaging deeper thinking processes. Small wonder that kids appear better at multitasking, faster at juggling thoughts in new and creative ways, but appear pathologically prone to attention deficit disorder, and weaker in consistency or original thinking skills.

New media introduced to children in their most formative pre-school years, produce generations that are the exact opposite of ourselves: trading our old economy capacity for deep concentration in exchange for a new economy mental agility and speed, and trading a preference for structured and pragmatic solutions in exchange for unstructured and creative approaches to problems. The landscape they inhabit is largely invisible to us.

We should not be surprised at this. Every generation in history has entrusted the incubators of the new world order to the guardians of the old world order. We have always inhibited our children by not seeing their world as well as they do. The speed of change in the last twenty years has been such, however, that the discontinuities and absurdities strike us with ever greater force. Never before has it seemed quite so obvious, that the student's capacity to learn far exceeds the teacher's capacity to teach, and the manager's capacity for leadership is sometimes sorely challenged by the drive and vision of the managed.

We don't often acknowledge the depth of this rift. We talk of "changing mindsets" as if it were a matter of pressing a button. The general idea is that we need a paradigm shift to move our mindset up into a new gear, and all we have to do is think a bit harder and peer a bit harder at our surroundings, and the paradigm shift will happen naturally. As with many clichés, this is a distortion of the original concept.

The term "paradigm shift" was most famously developed by the historian and philosopher of science, Thomas Kuhn, in his landmark book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn did not describe the paradigm shift primarily as an *intellectual* shift, but rather, a *social* shift. Scientists build theories, or paradigms, he argued, based on features of the landscape of knowledge that they can identify around them. Once these key features become the substructure for the theory, they become dogmas. Sooner or later, new generations begin to notice features of the landscape that don't fit the theory. As more of them become noticed, the discontinuities with the ruling paradigm prompt new observers to propose a new theory.

Interestingly, Kuhn notes, very often the key pillars of the old theory completely disappear in the new paradigm. The vocabulary, the important features of the landscape are completely different. Both parties are looking at the landscape and see completely different things – what is visible to one party is invisible to the other – and because the main pillars of a paradigm form its substructure, people become dogmatic and aggressive, and violent discord often results. Differences in perception and vocabulary means breakdown in communication, and it means conflict. New paradigms gain force most often, therefore, not through intellectual discussion and dialogue, because communication cannot easily bridge completely different ways of looking at the world. New paradigms gain force through a process of natural selection: they work better than the old ones, more people grow into them and prosper because they work better, adherents to

the old paradigms do not prosper, they multiply slower, they diminish and wither away.

Translated to the shift from task-based work to knowledge-based work, this is a bleak picture. It does not accommodate the vision and leadership of many older leaders, managers and politicians in driving the digital economy forward. It does not accommodate the levels of digital literacy that many pre-net generation workers and managers have achieved. Undoubtedly, it is possible to convert at least partially to new paradigms and new ways of doing things. Singapore's success and continuing economic power is witness to that.

In life, we know, no distinctions are absolute. However, in looking at the big sweeps of history, you have to look at the big numbers, and you have to acknowledge the pressures and anxieties that really exist. Many people feel the pressure of events beyond their control. Others feel excited by landscapes of opportunity. Both groups are looking at the same landscape. Those of us who were educated and formed in the pre-internet world will never see the full potential of the landscapes that polytechnic and university students now see. We can learn, sometimes painfully, to see the main outlines, but the future that is developing now does not belong to us, and no amount of unaided intellectual effort will deliver it to us.

Let us return to our encounter with the blind tour guide. So long as we held him to the stereotype role of lead, point and talk, he was of little use to us. It was only when he listened to us, questioned us about what we saw, and shared his experience of dialogue with a generation of visitors, that his blindness became an asset that sharpened our awareness of what was around us. So it is with managers. Systems, rule books and personnel management are the remnants of an age when managers truly did know more than their employees. We now need managers who can draw out the ability of our colleagues to articulate what they see and experience, question them and help them shape it into meaningful strategy, compel them to develop the skills of deeper thought and sustained attention that they lack, and validate their sense of discovery and ownership of what they find. In this world, ignorance is a distinct advantage because only through ignorance can we frame the questions that will chart the steps of the new landscape.

We are indeed at the cusp of a paradigm shift in perceptions of how economic and social reality works. What the Emperor Syndrome demonstrates is the vulnerability of traditional, old economy organisations, where perceptions are determined by old economy

sensibilities, and information is shaped and moulded according to old economy filters. It is no wonder our workplaces are fractured, chaotic, confusing and frustrating. The Ceaucescu Syndrome suggests the dangers of resistance to externally imposed change, and the double-edged sword of a rhetoric of empowerment for our workers. And the Component Syndrome illustrates the extent to which old economy models still hold sway, and the extent to which new economy skills need to pervade senior levels of management as much as the front lines.

In this month's issue above all, I have suggested that old economy trained leaders need to adopt a more humble, searching, questioning stance towards the newer generations, and accept that they have both strengths and weaknesses in the invisible landscapes of the new economy. The quality of our response to this new world depends on the quality of our relationships with those who see it most clearly. The wisest of pre-Net leaders are those who accept their blindness and seek out the most visionary of the new generation. The Senior Minister put it most aptly in his March 2000 address to the Singapore Techventure 2000 dinner in Silicon Valley: "I am not saying my mindset isn't from another generation, but I have young associates to remind me I am in the here and now".

This article first published in *The Business Times*, Singapore, August 15, 2000.