



## The Leadership Dilemma

We've all heard about Servant Leadership, Transformational Leadership, Authentic Leadership, Ubuntu Leadership and now comes Smart Leadership. So, what exactly is Smart Leadership, what are the characteristics of a Smart Leader and why does Smart Leadership matter? Is Smart Leadership just another passing fad or is there a deeper intrinsically motivated rationale for Smart Leadership. Who are these Smart Leaders...and more importantly how do they lead?

When one thinks of Smart Leadership, the acronym SMART normally springs to mind. My take on Smart Leadership is based more on the divergent meanings of the word. The focus on the ideologic meaning of "smart" leads one to conceptualise Smart Leadership underpinned by characteristics of being mentally alert, knowledgeable, witty and intelligent. This forms the basis of my thoughts on Smart Leadership.

## What is Smart Leadership?

Smart Leadership has many characteristics, but some important considerations stand out in the leadership landscape to foreground Smart Leadership. Smart Leadership is about being agile and flexible. It lies in creating an exciting and compelling vision and inspiring people to deliver on it. It energises people and ignites passion to unleash and exploit their talents. It focusses on imbuing a team with wisdom from experience and knowledge. A calm and rational demeanour even in the face of storms, volatility and uncertainty, characterises Smart Leadership. It is forward thinking and anticipatory. A sense of humour is an important facet of

Smart Leadership. It is about attention to detail and a focus on little things that matter. Smart leadership focusses on reaching out to people in a humane and compassionate way. Smart Leadership is underpinned by nurture and care and still holds people accountable while setting the bar high.

### The nexus between Smart Leadership and Coaching?

Having been in executive positions for over 20 years, I sat with a leadership dilemma when I started my learning journey as a professional coach. I thought that I had mastered the art of leadership and the results of my delivery made me cling to my recipe for success. My serious dilemma during my coaching journey was whether leadership and coaching were two distinct functions. My view has always been that a leader needs to be directive, a leader is always judgemental (are targets being met, is the team performance to standard, is the individual performance exceptional or mediocre?), a leader needs to be forthright and decisive, have all the answers, and to *lead* the team. Coaching on the other hand is hugely non-judgemental, non-directive, more importantly the coach does not need to be the content expert, and certainly does not need to have the answers. My initial view was that there was little room for congruence in these two roles. I held this view lightly and actively looked-for synergies during my coach training.

A coaching journey is an invitation to sharpen one's self awareness and my training journey was no different. I became very self-aware of how the nature and quality of my training impacted on my being as a leader. The search for congruence came in quiet moments as I did self-reflections. Several incidents brought a new perspective of leadership into sharp focus. In the seat of coach, one needs to listen more than you speak, and when you speak, you should ask questions that open thinking. Practicing this skill in the seat of a leader made me realise that by asking the right questions one can unlock the true power and potential of the team you lead.

The issue of suspending judgement was a big learning point for me. Instead of being judgemental in the seat of a leader I started asking questions that facilitated self-exploration around issues of quality, timeous delivery, and impact. I found that putting the onus on the team for self-correction facilitated through self-exploration, had deeper and lasting impact. This also placed the responsibility on us collectively as a team. This was a win-win situation. The burden was lighter for me, allowed me more time to focus on strategic issues and the team felt respected and empowered.

Coaching has the concept of contracting at its core. This is done by both parties agreeing to the contract. This for me was akin to involving the team in the strategic planning process, and the subsequent contracting around performance agreements. The difference in my new approach as leader was the consultative nature of the process, which put the ownership with both parties.

Both a leader and a coach are striving to get the best out of people and although the approach may differ, the outcome is very synergistic. Getting the best out of people does not take place in a vacuum. It is interwoven into the quality of the relationship. Experienced leaders and competent coaches recognise that the bedrock of Smart Leadership/Coaching lies in creating a conducive environment that allows people to unleash their talents, with the freedom to be truly innovative and creative.

The focus on cultivating and nurturing the relationship key to coaching. A leadership relationship is often less about the relationship and more about the outputs and outcomes of deliverables. However, if one wants to get the best out of people, the focus on the relationship is paramount. Once a strong relationship is formed and respect is engendered, the team will willingly go the extra mile.

There are many similar competencies associated with Smart Leadership that cohere with coaching. Nurturing the relationship is paramount, the concern for the person first is key, attentive listening is the key tool for a coach and brings wisdom and insight to the Smart Leader. Facilitating learning and results can best be achieved if people feel valued, respected and supported, skills common to both leader and coach. The key that drives people in a knowledge era is not job satisfaction or pay, but a sense of empowerment. Smart Leadership and Coaching are both truly focussed on empowering people and building sustainable behavioural competencies and shaping a World View.

### **Who is a smart leader and why does this matter?**

Of course, there are additional skills to Smart Leadership. These include having the courage to speak truth to power, to stay true to yourself and to focus on the common good of the organisation, rather than on individualistic needs. A smart leader is authentic and operates with integrity always, above all else.

The urgent need to engender Smart Leadership is compelling in creating good growing grounds for people to flourish. Each leader should strive towards Smart Leadership, not only because it's a smart thing to do, but because it frees up leadership time to focus on bigger issues on the horizon, instead of micromanagement.

## My experience of Smart Leadership.

Fortunately for me, most of the leaders that I have encountered in my career, can be characterised as Smart Leaders, and the focus on nurturing the relationship and respecting me as an individual that matters made all the difference in unlocking the best in me. One of the smart leaders I encountered early in my career, gave me a task that I considered formidable and way beyond my capability. I felt nervous just thinking about how I would not live up to expectations. He told me that nobody will empower me and that I must assume the power that is lying dormant deep within myself. In retrospect, I don't think that what he said, was as powerful as how it made me feel. I felt competent, encouraged, and ready to take on the challenge.....and yet the conversation probably did not last longer than 5 minutes.

Smart leaders are ready and willing to work alongside their team, being exemplary in their approach. I worked with a leader who would sit with the team and work as a foot soldier until the task was accomplished. He always gave recognition for a job well done.

For those few who I encountered as cold, uncaring and clinical, they consumed my energy in a negative downward spiral and detracted me from my true purpose. From first-hand experience, I realise the importance of nurturing relationships and focussing on people rather than outputs. That way you inspire people to fuel themselves is an intrinsic motivation. This builds skills for life, allows people to realise their true potential and to fully blossom into what they are meant to be. That's the synergy between coaching and Smart Leadership. There is in fact a great deal of congruence between a Smart Coach and a Smart Leader. They are both on a journey to bring out the best in people.

## How do they lead?

The wisdom that landed with me as my dilemma resolved, was that whilst leadership and coaching may fall into different disciplines, there is a great deal of congruence in both roles. Smart Leadership for me then, is the way one integrates the Leader as Coach into a Way of Being. A Smart Leader is one who empowers a team to make a difference and focusses on building and nurturing a caring and supportive relationship which creates the preconditions for success. A Smart Leader, knows that all the answers do not lie with him/her, but that creating the conducive environment that will allow the team to flourish and find solutions even to formidable challenges.

The wisdom that landed with me in this journey was the nexus between leadership and coaching. My conclusion is that a Smart Leader is one who sits in the seat of Leader as Coach,

who does not have the urge to hold on too tightly to the reins, but allows people to find their purpose and make meaningful contributions from an inspired and empowered space.

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