

What Next?

by Harriet Griffey

The current global economic recession has affected all organisations from the private to the public sectors, and for many this has involved major reorganisation and change as they struggle to manage its impact. For so long in many organisations the emphasis has been on cost-cutting, retrenchment and staying afloat but what is key, says Olivier Mythodrama's (OMA) Senior Associate Ben Walden, is for leadership to focus not only on crisis management in times of change and uncertainty but also on a long-term vision of sustainability.

Throughout history, a period of recession is eventually followed by an upturn, and those organisations that are smart enough to weather the worst are usually those who have continuously looked at what was necessary to prepare for eventual growth. To make the comparison with Shakespeare's Henry V, on which OMA's Inspirational Leadership programme is based, it's all about the sort of leadership that can inspire others on the journey through the dark night of the soul, motivating the troops for battle, through to tending the metaphorical garden, and making good the effort that's gone before. But in the real world, it's not always easy to see how to balance the sort of leadership that manages crisis with a vision for the future, especially when the short-term goals are all about staying afloat rather than sustaining growth.

"What drives this short-termism is fear," says Ben Walden, who leads on OMA's delivery of the Henry V programme. "A climate of fear presents a real sense that there is a need for emergency thinking, for crisis-mode thinking, with an all-hands on deck, "hit the coffee machine we're here until midnight" mentality. But actually this isn't always the best way to manage a crisis."

OMA's Inspirational Leadership programme is unique in that it delivers a vision of what is necessary for organisational sustainability along with its leadership models for times of crisis, making it a particularly effective and popular programme for contemporary organisations. Drawing on Shakespeare's story of Henry V's and his ability to motivate the troops within a given moment, the programme also provides opportunity to explore long-term goals and business sustainability from the onset. Using a model drawing on Archetypal Psychology, participants examine their own leadership styles through four characters – the Good King (representing Order) the Warrior

(representing Action), the Good Mother (representing Nurture) and the Medicine Woman (representing Change).

“Leaders can become too warrior like,” stresses Walden. “And this can create a competitive obsession. In the short term you reach targets, but in the long term you burn out. And when there’s no sustainability vision, then there can be enormous problems, exactly what we have seen in some sections of the banking sector. It became all about short-term profit, and long-term sustainability went out the window with catastrophic consequences. So it’s imperative to be vigilant about what comes next – a process we call ‘tending the garden’ – even when there seems no time to do it. Sustainability has to be a necessity for both corporate and individual function.”

Walden is not alone in his assessment of this need for organisational sustainability, and the need to factor it into any organisational development. Jim Collins, for example, in the five-year research on which his book *From Good to Great* is based, found that on average it took four years for the good-to-great companies he identified to make that transition from good to great organisations, with commensurate economic returns. “Dramatic results do not come from dramatic process – not if you want them to last, anyway,” Collins says. “A serious revolution, one that feels like a revolution to those going through it, is highly unlikely to bring about a sustainable leap from being good to being great. There was no miracle moment. Instead, a down-to-earth, pragmatic, committed-to-excellence process – a framework – kept each company, its leaders, and its people on track for the long haul.”

“Collins looked at qualities of leadership in those companies that most out-performed the Nasdaq over a long period,” says Walden. “And some of them had been through periods of major instability and crisis as a result of which the change management process had borne them real success. He talks about level 5 leadership – not necessarily the most charismatic, but long-term thinkers who empower others, have a clear vision for the company, are in service to something bigger than themselves, and seem to be united by a sense of humility. If someone in a leadership role shows these traits, then this gives you a much better chance for the long haul.”

Inevitably in times of crisis, the emphasis is on what needs to be done immediately to achieve stability without much concern for long-term goals, but if this strategy continues, it can be counterproductive. “The problem is that in this state, people think it’s all about survival and feeling that the last thing that they have time for now is to look at long-term sustainability,” says Walden. “And I think that’s significant, because even during times like these, long-term sustainability should be relevant and not just for a company, but individuals as well.”

Looking to the model of Henry V is instructive, because a crucial part of his journey towards being a great king, is to take stock and “tend the garden” to ensure that it is his continued success as a king after the battle of Agincourt that ultimately defines him, rather than just the successful outcome of the battle itself. But for Henry, as for many others, this isn’t always such a comfortable place to be. “Henry himself says he finds this difficult,” says Walden. “He’s emotionally intelligent on the battlefield,

but finds the emotional interplay without clear targets very difficult, as do a lot of others. Where there's no clear target, many people find this really tough. And some have no interest in doing this work. And this is not work you can rush. It's about the things that don't immediately offer clear profit but research shows us again and again are vital to organisations for their long-term sustainability."

However, what the Archetypal Character model makes very clear is that there must be room for the characteristics of the great mother and the great king – reviewing, planning, clearing, ordering and nurturing – alongside those of the warrior and medicine woman – creativity, brainstorming, action, and competition, in order to achieve organisational sustainability.

While some shy away from the more feeling aspects of leadership, finding it – like Henry – less tangible to deal with, it is imperative that this is addressed says Walden, while also recognising that it can be something of a struggle for some.

"Groups are often split on this, depending on their personalities," he says. "The ones who are more engaged in how are we doing as a team, what do we look like internally, how do we manage relations, are very keen on looking at it. But others are nervous of the whole conversation. They feel it's very wishy-washy or airy-fairy. They feel it's really not relevant, that organisational life is tough, and you just need to deal with it. Or they are nervous of discussing feeling states altogether, they feel that they may lose control over a situation, that it may get out of hand, that someone might produce an emotion they might find difficult to deal with.

"What we do over the course of the programme is that we trade, as it were, what the more warrior-types want to look at, in return for looking at this. Then, within this context, they tend to get very involved and start coming up with all sorts of strategies about how they can get involved and what might improve things. But you certainly have to start with what matters to them, and in my experience they will want to look at things like crisis management and communication skills, for example, so one of the things we do is to frame this for them around areas like how to motivate those who are more interested in long-term sustainability, along with the emotional inter-relationships in teams. We look at how do you work with that, and what sort of language are they going to respond to, if you're going to motivate them. So you can look at motivating the troops – something warrior-types respond to – but frame it towards long term sustainability."

"There's an economic imperative, but there's also a psychological imperative," continues Walden. "You don't want high turnover, and you don't want talented people moving on because they don't feel it is a conducive environment in which to work. That's not cost effective either. This often comes down to the leadership of individual teams, rather than the chief exec of the whole organisation, and whether the leaders of teams are conscious of honouring the kind of stuff that Act V is about, which is sustainability. And while that may not immediately show up on the end of year results, it does in time. There is the myth that for an organisation to be successful it must be emotionally hardened, but this isn't supported by evidence. Emotional literacy shows good results."