Managers and Leaders: The Unnamed Philosophers

The philosophical experience described in the last chapter is vital in the world of management. Without calling it by name, managers do engage in the activity of the philosophical process. They have experiences which can be described as philosophical. These experiences are central to their practices as managers. These are experiences in which managers are concerned with gaining and giving perspective on situations in which they find themselves. This chapter will show how central philosophical experiences are to the practices of leaders.

The last chapter allows us to identify certain features of the philosophical experience. It is not an everyday experience. It is an experience which becomes significant when we cannot take our habits of practice or our everyday way of doing things for granted. It disrupts or jolts us out of our everyday complacency. In the experience of disruption we come to see the assumptions which have guided our way of experiencing the world but have for the most part been implicit. We are challenged to question our taken for granted ways of seeing things. The philosophical experience opens up the possibility of seeing and experiencing the world in new ways.

How does this description of the philosophical experience relate to management? It is a common observation that we live in a world of change. The more things change, the less we can rely on our habitual ways of doing things. The more things change, the more we need to be able to think “outside of our boxes.” The original image for thinking outside of our boxes is in fact derived from the philosopher Plato who says that philosophy begins in the moment of learning to think outside of “our caves.” For Plato philosophy begins where we leave the “comfort zone” of the familiar.

Historically, as John Kotter tells us, managers have not been trained for thinking outside of our caves or boxes. Rather managers have been trained to think under conditions of stability: “too many people have been trained for and raised in a more stable world, a world that for the most part no longer exists. Too many people have been trained only to manage the
current system or to make incremental shifts. They have not been shown how to provide the leadership necessary to make bigger leaps.” (1999)

Yet as, amongst others Jack Welch tells us, we are living in times where we cannot take the conventions of management for granted. In the context of arguing for the limitations of scientific rationalist approaches to management Welch has said: “We have to undo a 100-year old concept [of scientific management] and convince managers that their role is not to control people and stay ‘on top’ of things, but rather to guide, energize, and excite.” (Lowe, 1998, 15)

Welch is suggesting that we cannot take the traditional assumptions of management for granted. These assumptions informed by the scientific tradition in management are no longer appropriate to the everyday reality in which managers, leaders and people in organisations find themselves. As Kotter suggests in the above quotation, managers and leaders find themselves in a position of questioning their habitual assumptions and conventions. In the terms of this book, they find themselves in the middle of a philosophical experience in which the old assumptions are no longer valid but no new ones have yet taken root – if anything there are a number of fads, none of which have been affirmed as an enduring foundation for management.

Whether they like it or not, those managers and leaders who experience the collapse of the old assumptions are in a process of questioning the assumptions of management. It may not be something they asked for. It may not be something that they wish to do. Indeed they may simply wish to carry on with their job. But once having experienced the unviability of the traditional way of doing things, they are thrown into the uncertainty of questioning. They are thrown into a philosophical mode. In this space we need to embrace and engage in the art of questioning. This is why Lou Gerstner of IBM can say: “Once you think you’re at the point that it’s time to write it down, build the manual, and document the formula, you’re no longer exploring, questioning, the status quo. We are constantly challenging what we do – building a culture of restless self-renewal.” (Neff, 1999)

It is in the space between the collapse of the old management assumptions and the not yet of the new that we engage in such questioning. The idea of building a culture of restless renewal through constantly questioning the status quo lies at the heart of philosophy. Socrates, the archetypal philosopher of the Western world is famous for his process of constantly questioning everything, not for the sake of being clever but because it always opened up new possibilities and ways of seeing things – just as in the case of Gerstner. Socrates is identified as a philosopher because of his process of constantly questioning the status quo. Furthermore, he questioned in the experience of being between the collapse of Athens traditional image of itself as a military empire and the not yet of a new way of being for Athens, one in which Athens would become a seat of learning.