

**WHY DO WE STILL DO IT?**  
**The curse of 'Panacea Mania'**  
**Robert Burke**

**Overview:**

Business remains focused on the latest management panacea, hoping that their immediate problems can thus be solved. But perhaps it is this urge for quick solutions that is the problem. As an alternative, leadership transformation is offered, that is, not the latest fix but a change in learning context. The Organisation Description Questionnaire (ODQ) offers an insight to the level of panacea mania in organisational cultures.

Keywords: leadership, management, corporations ODQ

Business as just a way of occupying the day for human beings seems to get increasing support when we see a multitude of business panaceas, such as BPR, TQM, JIT, HRM, Benchmarking, Downsizing, Rightsizing etc get such prominence and support. Yet there is little evidence that these 'miracles' have actually made any difference, except, that is, for those who invented them (Lester: 1997).

This same argument was also current regarding the millennium bug and whether or not this was a real threat or not. If it was or if it wasn't is not the point. What is the point is that organisations have manoeuvred themselves into positions where panaceas thrive. In other words there is little confidence in making one's own decisions.

Panaceas have evolved, in my view, as a result of inadequate leadership. That is, they were designed by clever people, usually academics in business schools or clever consultants, to prop up inadequate (underdeveloped) leaders with processes and procedures that have effectively isolated people in leadership positions from making decisions of real significance, that of ensuring sustainability and meaning for both present and future generations. If we look at some of these people now we can see that many have reached 'Guru' status and, as a result, have keen followers - even disciples.

**Leadership development**

So why do we still do it?

It is my view that we still do it as the alternative, leadership development in its real sense, is too much of a paradigm shift from the way good management has been espoused and taught post WW11. This, particularly from those business schools and influential consulting firms still deeply entrenched in 'panacea mania'.

The threat to creating the required change in leadership attributes could well be seen in coming from these traditional approaches to business education. Indeed, the late futurists Robert Theobald (1999) says;

We are becoming aware that learning institutions and learning societies are necessary to future success. Unfortunately we are also discovering that effective learning does not take place in traditional schools and colleges. The real challenge is always to provide people with the interest and skills to be self-motivated learners. Regrettably, past patterns of teaching have often numbed the spirit of inquiry that children naturally have. In addition, concentration on single styles of learning excludes others who gain knowledge in other ways, such as using their hands and their bodies. It is to be hoped that current schools and universities will adapt but much of the most interesting innovation is coming outside them.

Paul Wildman's observation (Futures: 1998) in his article 'From the Monophonic University to the Polyphonic Multiversities' argues strongly the view that seeking alternatives to the one right way of knowing must become the educational imperative.

Learning must become a strategic imperative for any organisation that wishes to be part of the future. However, there clearly must be a distinction between learning and training. Training is analogous to information. Some believe, mistakenly, that we can never get enough of it. Learning, on the other hand, is something that you can never get enough of.

In our society the recognition of talent depends largely on idealised and entrenched perceptions of academic achievement and job performance. Researchers such as Dr Robert Sternberg (Thinking Styles: Cambridge University Press, 1997 and Malcolm Davies, 1997) reject this trend by emphasising the method of our thought rather than its content.

Psychologists Sternberg and Davies argue that ability often goes unappreciated and uncultivated not because of lack of talent, but because of conflicting styles of thinking and learning.

Leadership development is not only about learning management practice skills, as important as these are but, more importantly, about learning about your individual self, your part in the ecosystem, and the way in which you can positively influence the future.

Recognising this still remains a problem as many of the existing organisational leaders will still ask the question If they know so much about it why aren't they as successful as I am?

My limited experience with the MLQ and ODQ suggests that ironically only good organisations (those with good leadership) are likely to use such instruments. They use the instruments in order to develop themselves and their people. Organisations, which lack effective leadership usually also, lack effective leadership tools such as the MLQ and ODQ possibly because of the anxieties 1 and 2 as Schein calls them. That is the paradoxical fear of the need to learn and the fear of learning.

Thus it was not surprising to find the organisation that we used the ODQ instrument with rated themselves 8 'Maturing structure'. That is they are in good shape and leadership development is a priority for them.

The question that emerges is “How do we get to those organisations who really need leadership development?” The blockage I suggest is largely due to panacea mania and the failure of their promise.

### **Organisational and human futures**

So what does this mean for organisations and for careers for human beings?

The biggest unknown for the individual in a knowledge-based economy is how to have a career in a system where there are no careers. This is the reality of today. In overcoming this uncertainty it is necessary to become a life long learner and be constantly gaining new skills in order to be as multi-skilled as possible and therefore have greater opportunity. This implies that the traditional schools, colleges and universities must embrace the other ways of knowing as part of their curriculum. This further implies development of new leadership paradigms for our programmed knowledge institutions.

The concept of a job for life no longer exists, even in the Church. For example, the Anglican Church now requires its ministers to 'justify' themselves financially in order to remain employees of the Church. Are these 'good' decisions or are they a result of successful consultants taking over the leadership of these, and many other, organisations with their panaceas and 'ecorat' (economic rationalist) simplicity?

Organisational longevity is also a thing of the past. We know that 40% of the Fortune top 500 organisations of a decade ago no longer exist. Mergers and acquisitions have not generally proved to be the panacea sought as often little effort is placed on the needs of individuals other than shareholders. As a result the overwhelming influence of cultural imperatives dominate and the precious energy needed to create a successful merger or acquisition is dissipated into corrosive actions of individuals, usually those individuals in senior management roles where the corrosive content takes on mortal significance.

### **Giving up panacea mania**

So why do we still do it?

Probably because our addiction to 'panacea mania' has made it very difficult to give the habit up. Transformational Leadership Development offers a safe and effective withdrawal from this habit.

A new nexus is emerging that involves scientists and futurists with the emerging psychology based leadership developers based on the four components to the ideal attribute of a leader, intellectual stimulation, individual considerations, inspirational motivation and idealised behaviour which the MLQ measures.

From this the leadership outcome will emerge. The leadership outcome will determine the organisational outcome, which the ODQ effectively measures.

Leadership and Organisational outcomes will determine the individual and the organisation reputation. Reputation and effective organisational outcomes come from how close Leaders are to the ideal leadership attributes.

Edgar Schein (1997) is quite right to point out that a description of an organisation's culture makes public the deeper underlying aspects of that organisation at a time when it is still very much part of the scene.

In conclusion it needs to be emphasised that organisations are systems and that for the organisation to be effective it has to be good at both the rational and non-rational to move beyond 'panacea mania', and to encompass the other ways of knowing. The MLQ and ODQ gives organisations a useful tool by which to measure their leadership effectiveness.

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