

REFORMING LEADERSHIP

less urging 'wherefore!' - more explaining 'why?'

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There is a difference between a 'why?' and a 'wherefore!'. A 'wherefore' urges action; a 'why' fires you up with a reason. Every wherefore needs a why. But we're over-loaded with directives and under-supplied with explanations. And wherefores without whys offer neither hope nor explanation - they are whims.

The questioning takes this route...

**... why is it like this?
... why we should probe deeper? and
... why that needs better evidence?**

And it takes us to where we can see...

**... why students and clients do what they do; and
... why we need to rethink leadership.**

The issues raised here have a long pedigree - they were first called up in community-interaction thinking. But this article shows that they have now become critically urgent.

Leadership-for-change fires up sustainable hope. But, Bill argues, that this depends less on charismatic leadership, more on savvy followership.

The most hopeful quality of leadership is that somebody is fired-up to follow. But beware - finding followers is no guarantee that your ideas are worth following. And the converse is also true: some ideas do not instantly attract the following they deserve:

*a development group needs new thinking -
you know your idea is going to break new ground -
and it gets nods of agreement and murmurs of approval -
colleagues thank you -
and they mean it -
but when the action is agreed, people fall back to where they were -
it is as if you said nothing*

Sound familiar? Careers education and guidance has well-trodden pathways. They are strewn with indicators for what we are supposed to do. Some are self imposed, some placed by others. Few offer any indication of why they are such a good idea. A person can get over-dependent on that kind of navigation.

why we do what we do: If you've been thwarted in this way you're in good company. One of our most famous - yet most neglected - signposters is Paul Willis. He resists the call of conventional thinking. He doesn't see the free-standing psychology of individual differences as a basis for decision-making. Sociologist Paul tells of a group of lads who - though psychologically different - manage career on the basis of shared experience. It

is a cultural explanation, not a psychological one. And it opens doors to new possibilities for action - and not just for working-class lads.

The book - *Learning to Labour* - attracts a lot of nods and murmurs. But it challenges dominant thinking - habits-of-mind. They attribute faltering careers to *personal* lacks in skills and qualifications; they see low motivation as *psychological* impulsiveness; and they say that lack-of-aspiration calls for more *individual* help. Paul proposed a change-of-mind. And that means stopping to wonder about what we have assumed to be so.

But to just nod and murmur, and to do nothing, is to settle for yet another variation on the same-old-same-old. Our work becomes a sort of *Carry on Careering* - recycling old gags for new audiences.

It would be as if Paul Willis had said nothing.

probing deeper: Paul Willis's lads are not best understood as unskilled, defiant and impulsive - there is a lot more going on. But it needs a deeper 'why?' - looking for what underlies what we first notice.

The call for that kind of probing gets widespread support. An approach to commercial thinking calls on a process of asking, not one, but five 'whys'. In another development-group meeting it might work out something like this:

*sales are down -
but why? ...because of unreliable performance -
but why? ...because of poor materials -
but why? ...because of working down to a price -
but why? - ...because of maintaining market share -
but why? - ...hard to say, that sector of the market is already saturated*

wait a minute - if that's so we need to get an entirely new handle on this

Any parallels here to our thinking? Well there is this: the five whys do not find knee-jerk whims; they require that one thing is taken with another; they track chains of causes-and-effects; they start with a here-and-now specific, but they find their way to an underlying issue. The process leads to ideas-for-action that habits-of-mind would not have considered.

And, well managed, they expose - layer-by-layer - realities that cause us to reposition what we do. In career-management asking as few as five probing 'whys' can give you a really-useful 'wherefore'.

But working with five whys needs skilful enabling. Coming up with a 'wherefore' directive - without working through credible 'whys' - this is a whim. It is also is a good way of getting bogged down in initiative-overload. Getting past all of that junk calls for a special sort of leadership.

finding the evidence: If we're going to track things in this probing way we need evidence which can show how one thing leads to another - and not just where it's easy to see, but where it isn't. Not a lot of our current research is like that.

But Howard Williamson's research is. In *The Milltown Boys Revisited* those boys - like Paul's lads - though psychologically different, are bound together by shared experience. You have clients and students like that.

But, by following-up them up more than twenty years into their careers, Howard gets deeper into such stories. He tracks, not just how early experience shapes career, but how work-life interacts with other aspects of their lives - upbringing, marriage, home-life, parenthood, spare-time and volunteering. There is plenty of grist for a 'five-why' mill here.

And it gives us a handle on deeper explanations of why your students and clients do what they do. Howard's boys move into a diverse range of careers - some of them 'middle-class', a few of them criminal. But none of them is based on linking individuals to opportunities - this is about a whole lot more than that. It is, he says, a 'ducking-and-diving' experience - from attachment, allegiance, surprise, disappointment, regret - and, sometimes, to a new start. Shared experience shapes hanging-in career, and hanging-in career shapes shared experience. One of the most remarkable features of these men's disclosures is the extent to which they feel able to speak for each other.

Career management, for these boys - and for your clients and students - is an economic activity, a learning journey and a search for well-being. Both Paul Willis and Howard Williamson have the breadth-of-mind and the sensitivity to get that kind of disclosure.

So why do they not have a greater influence? It may be gender-related: individualistic career, in a social vacuum, has a kind of masculinity about it - calling up competitive rather than companionable metaphors.

We need a leadership which can maintain contact with all sides of that humanity.

students and clients doing what they do: So can the Milltown Boys show us answers to five career-management 'whys'? Five is an arbitrary number; the task is to maintain a probing sequence. But let's try five: the following paragraphs quote the boys in response to a five-fold sequence of 'whys?'.

1. **Why** do smart kids sideline school, settle for routine work, turn to crime, and resort to drugs?

Because they don't expect to find anything better:

*I think I knew when I was younger that I was heading that way -
I knew I was going to spend some time in prison -
given what I was doing it was bound to happen sooner or later - wasn't it?*

'Ted'

2. **Why** do they find that so predictable?

Because they don't know what else there might be:

*I knew I was going to do an apprenticeship but I did not know whether that was what
I wanted to be doing -*

*because I'd not experience of anything -
you know, I might have liked to be a social worker or a solicitor - I just don't know*

'Shaun'

3. **Why** are they so short of ideas?

Because they don't have the sources, the connections or the contacts:

*I knew somebody somewhere was having it -
I assumed it must be in London, or New York or America, or whatever -
but I didn't have the background, the contacts, the things you needed to be part of it*

'Jerry'

4. **Why** do they have that sense of separation?

Because they can justify what they do in other terms - terms that make credible sense of their own experience:

*I lost my job because I just couldn't be bothered working -
I found that thieving with these boys was much more fun -
you didn't have to get up in the morning and it was more um... lucrative*

'Spaceman'

5. **Why** are they so ready to run that risk?

Because the risk matters less than keeping the trust of who they know best:

*Danny has been good to me over the years -
same as Ted, when I needed them -
that is what it is about really -
you make them kind of friends only once in your life -
you do things together when you are younger -
and so, when you are older, you know everything about each other*

'Vic'

Asking five whys does not make an analysis, it gives us a conversation, based on open questions - which can lead anywhere. A key part of the process is working out what questions to ask of this particular here-and-now. That exchange will develop differently, at different times, with different people, talking to different facilitators.

These are young men whose aspirations we are urged to raise. And there is, therefore, a temptation to insert one of our ready-made and familiar answers to one or more of these five questions. You may have noticed that. But basing sustainable hope on well-founded explanation needs us to resist that temptation and, instead, to follow a sequence drawn by these young men. This is because the task is not - yet - to find a destination, it is - first - to agree a map. The findings of this enquiry signpost how the journey may be plotted - from

what we first notice, to where we need to go in order to understand it. It starts with a present reality, but senses an underlying dynamic. This is not knee-jerk stuff.

We need these voices because what they say is more than just communication; language has other, deeper, uses. This is how Vic and the others - like your students and clients - signpost their world. Their images, lyrics, stories, and memories speak of how things are, of what is worthwhile and of what can be expected. It affirms identity - for them a shared identity.

But, although all of this is culturally acquired from 'out-there' experience, it is also deeply embedded 'in here'. There are moments when Vic and the others are voicing what seem to them to be unassailable truths. Those 'truths' entice bright kids into dull jobs; and, more than that, they entangle good people in bad action.

So what they describe can look like cultural entrapment. That's how Paul Willis sees the lads - they collude in their own downfall. And - it's true - these are stories of lost aspiration: Ted's hopes were thwarted for too long, and Shaun had hope squeezed out of him when he was no more than a lad.

So it is tempting to ascribe irrationality - even self-destructiveness. And we can easily fit that kind of explanation into the conventional thinking of careers education and guidance. But Vic and the others have learned from their experience in much the same way as people learn from their experience in leafy suburb and gated community. And with no greater degree of irrationality. Neither should we assume that leafy suburbs and gated communities do not harbour, at some level, a capacity for irrationality, dullness, bad moves - and even self-destruction. If we mean to help any of them - Vic or Victoria - to raise their aspirations, then we need to be able to understand them in the terms that they understand themselves.

The lads and the boys found that Paul Willis and Howard Williamson could do that. Theirs is a special kind of research.

reforming leadership - reframing action: Paul Willis blazed a trail into understanding how people find their identities in what they see going on around them. That experience can only be set down as narrative - the recollection of your clients' and students' stories carry their identity. Contemporary media-scholar Knut Lundby - in *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories* - characterises narrative as a means of making sense of where we are and who we are - both as individuals and as groups. In our work Paul Willis anticipated that claim by several decades.

But Knut is right, now, to bring it up again: the insight is urgently contemporary. It frames a way of seeing how people use their experience to become who they are. That now applies as much to how we define ourselves as consumers as it does to how we present ourselves as workers: we find in our experience the 'must-haves' which drive a consumer culture. The case is set out by sociologist Zygmunt Baumann, in subtle and dynamic terms, as *Liquid Modernity*. He shows how we use the opportunities and examples of experience to assemble and customise a display of what we take to be our identity. The link from your students and clients, to Zygmunt Baumann, Knut Lundby and to Paul Willis is in talk of the influence of experience - and, especially, shared experience.

Careers education and guidance has no framework for this kind of thinking. The psychologically-driven analyses we have developed, for competitive engagement in

individual advancement, will not hold it is any useful position. But it is our frameworks which pose our research questions and give useful shape to our research findings. So we need a frame which finds new and useful thinking, and can point to appropriate, effective and sustainable action.

Community-interaction thinking was a first step in the development of such a framework. It is based largely on Paul Willis's work; but it develops that into a meta-analysis which draws on samples in different social settings and a range of backgrounds - including run-down neighbourhood and leafy suburbs. But we need more than a psychological apparatus to fix these sociological realities.

Useful research shapes ideas-for-action. It means using the 'why?' question to search for both retrospective and prospective explanations: not just 'why did you do that?' but also 'why would you do something different?'. Community interaction offers that kind of framework: the way it explains *existing* learning from *familiar* cultural experience provides a basis for explaining *new* learning from *other* cultural experience. Whatever is constricting your students' and client's life chances, can - then - suggest what you can do to expand them. That 'why' becomes a basis for a 'wherefore': it shows how social learning which limits a life, can also be used to liberate it.

Community Interaction is republished on this site largely because what was first conceived as living in neighbourhoods must now be understood as life on the net. Virtual communities drive bright people to do silly things and entangle good people in bad moves - and that now poses issues of some urgency. It applies to how career management links to shopping; but also to all the other preferences, allegiances persuasions that people find on the net - and which they translate into a basis for action.

Any ideas which can show how such interactions can not only limit a life, but liberate it, those ideas rate better than a nod of recognition and a murmur of approval. They point to the need for a change-in-direction in our work - a call for new leadership.

The base-line qualification for leadership is simple: 'find followers'. But people follow for all kinds of reasons. Some want to be associated with the influential - they seek leaders with clout. Others recognise the usefulness of an idea - their leaders have wisdom. In any contest between clout and wisdom, wisdom needs all the followers it can muster. And the most useful followers are more impressed by credible ideas than muscular leverage.

And so, the call for new leadership doesn't start with some mythic clarion call from on-high. It starts with what you can do with the ideas that demand your informed attention. We should be careful about who we allow so to impress us, because (as somebody more-or-less said)...

*if we become underlings -
the fault lies not in our leaders -
but in ourselves*

Renewed hope needs change. But change is less dependent on how leaders reform us, it can make more of how we reform our leaders. And so, it's not charismatic leadership that we need - it is savvy followership. And that's you.