

‘ADAPTIVE’ v ‘TECHNICAL’ – A King’s Quest To Find A Voice



My wife and I had a rare trip to the cinema this weekend to see *‘The King’s Speech’*, starring the excellent Colin Firth as the stammering Bertie, King George VI. The story follows the relationship between the Royal

as he moves from being a Duke to a reluctant King in a pre-war Britain and an unorthodox Australian speech therapist called Lionel Logue, splendidly played by Geoffrey Rush. The moving story shows how the friendship between two men, drawn from starkly different backgrounds, grows and how Lionel eventually helps the King to overcome his debilitating speech impediment.

As well as being a great character story, the film is set in the 1930’s and provides us with a colourful window onto a world that existed within the lifetime of our parents and grand parents, many of whom are still alive today. To see how people behaved and to glimpse the prevailing paradigms and attitudes of the day was as fascinating as the main storyline itself. It made me pause to reflect what future generations would make of the interconnected, technology-enabled, lightning quick, ever smaller world we live in today, when they look back at the stories we are currently living through.

The storyline focuses on how Lionel sets about ‘curing’ the King’s speech impediment. The genius of the cure is that Lionel recognises from the start that the impediment requires an *‘adaptive’* solution rather than a *‘technical’* solution. The stammering Duke had the best physicians in the land prescribing mechanical, chemical (*“I have been told to continue smoking it lubricates the throat and does it good”*) and physical solutions to the impediment – the prevailing

mindset being that the solution to any such ailment lay in such ‘technical’ areas.

‘The genius of Lionel was that he realised the problem was adaptive not technical.’

Luckily for the King, the unorthodox Aussie was not cut from the same cloth as the best physicians in the land. He came from a very different world from that inhabited by his Royal patient. Lionel instinctively realised that the real problem centred on how the Duke related to the impediment. He also knew he had to encourage the soon-to-be King to adapt and grow beyond the limitations and appalling constraints, negative feedback and behavioural norms thrust on him by the world in which he lived. It is easy from our 2011 perspective to look at the behaviour he had to endure and think of it as cruel, but it was normal for the time, of course.



There was a brilliant exchange between the two characters that demonstrated their common sense of humour but starkly different world views. Lionel said in frustration when trying to get the Duke to speak whilst having loud music pumped into his ears: *“Surely the mind of a Duke knows what his mouth is saying”*, to which the Duke responded: *“You really have not had many dealings with Royals, have you?”*

‘Turning to the unorthodox is another way to solve seemingly unsolvable problems.’

The humour in the relationship is a key ingredient that runs throughout the story and proves a strong

foundation for what turns out to be a lifelong friendship based on mutual trust, caring and understanding. Courage, trust and the desire to succeed are the key ingredients of the King's eventual success – that, coupled with the foresight of his wife to try the unorthodox as another way to solve seemingly unsolvable problems.

As I watched the movie, I noted many parallels to the way some leaders tackle challenges in their organisations today. Like the King, they are often trapped by a prevailing paradigm and a commonly held world view which operates in the circles in which they move. The leading 'technical' physicians of our day advise investing heavily in technical solutions, with only a cursory nod towards the adaptive elements of the problem they are seeking to resolve. As a consequence, organisations spend heavily on new systems, new structures, new processes, the latest technology, etc., all in pursuit of the ideal answer to the challenges they face.

'No one has been sacked for employing the leading experts and following their advice.'



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Our innovative and unique Human Performance Index™ enables leaders to measure human performance. We focus on areas where our clients can raise the bar on performance, productivity and profit, ensuring that any work we do has clear line of sight to specific business aims. This means that a solid return on time, energy and investment is realised.

Our clients recognise us as experts in the process of unlocking potential and focusing this in the right ways to achieve the right outcomes, by emotionally engaging leaders and leadership teams to own the change, take accountability for it and deliver it. *In short... "We do the really hard part of the soft stuff."*

This mantra still resonates with the leaders of many of today's larger corporations and too few have the courage to try the unorthodox when it comes to organisational change. Consequently, they usually underestimate or fail to recognise the 'adaptive' elements of the challenges they face.

If the prevailing paradigm is one that sees organisations as machines that need to be oiled, tuned and made as efficient as possible, then 'technical' solutions have a great appeal and will prevail.

An alternative and slightly unorthodox view is to consider organisations as 'organisms' that need to be nurtured, fed and cared for. This alternative view makes investment in the way human beings adapt, grow, interact and work together a more appealing improvement strategy. If leaders of large organisations spent a moment in quiet reflection, they would soon realise that all of the challenges they face have at least some adaptive element, and some are entirely adaptive in nature.



In Sensei we appreciate the power of technical solutions and the many advantages they offer organisations. Our purpose and focus, however, come from

another paradigm: we are human performance specialists. Our role is to help leaders realise that technical assets and solutions without high quality human interaction and engagement are in the end pretty worthless. To extend the analogy, they are as much use as Berty's father yelling at him: *"Enunciate man, enunciate!"*

If you are interested in how we can help you understand the adaptive elements of the challenges you face in your organisation, please get in touch.

Malcolm Follos, January 2011