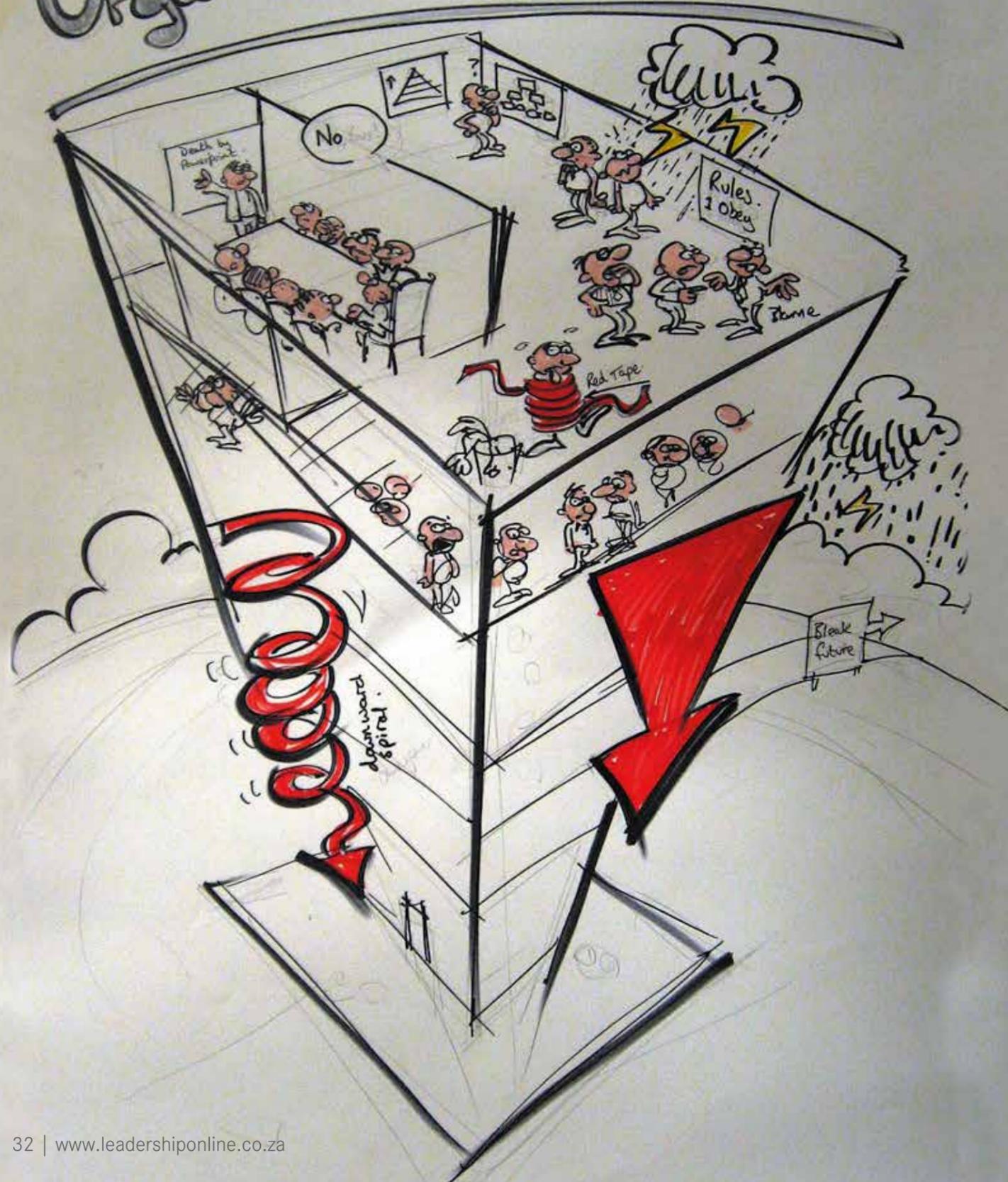# Unfit for human life

A key leadership challenge of our times is to create high-performance cultures with employees who bring their collective wisdom and potential to the workplace, rather than just their ability to deliver on an instruction or follow the job description

Organisations are not fit for human life, and this shows in the decreasing levels of employee engagement, the struggle with innovation and creativity and the challenge of achieving performance targets.

How many people do you know who are excited about going to work, feel valued, are passionate about their jobs and look forward to Monday mornings?

Gary Hamel, management theorist and author of *The Future of Management* writes about the need for organisations to shift away from the Management 1.0 paradigm where employees are considered to be like machines that can be controlled. This mechanistic orientation sees people as 'human doings'!

People are not viewed as having worthwhile contributions to make, their perspectives are considered to be unimportant and the job needs just to get done – effectively and on time. This way of engaging with employees will give the organisation obedience in the short term perhaps, but long-term organisational sustainability and a thriving business will never be realised through this way of managing.

High-performance cultures

We should be seeking to have 'human beings' in our workplace, making a contribution and feeling valued. A key leadership challenge of our times is therefore to create high-performance cultures with employees who bring their collective wisdom and potential to the workplace, not just their ability to deliver on an instruction or follow the job description. Organisations need employees who demonstrate creativity, passion and innovation – and we can't buy this!

So essentially, there are two things that need to shift:
• There is a dismantling of denial that needs to happen around the role and value of the individual leader and;
• There is an environment that needs to be created which allows for the manifestation of people wanting to make a contribution and thus bringing their fullest potential to the workplace.

A turbulent environment

Many leadership theories today indicate that leadership is transforming at a rapid pace to keep up with globalisation and flattening organisational hierarchies. Leaders operating in such a turbulent environment are required to possess a specific set of skills.

Historically, leadership models emphasised hierarchy, charisma and power over followers. In contrast, new models emphasise collaboration, shared power, and recognition of multiple leadership styles and roles. It is becoming evident that a different kind of leadership is needed – an era in which leadership can navigate the complexities and challenges of the 21st century.

But what is required is leadership that is not based on reliance on individual leaders. The place for the single heroic leader who tackles the problem and creates solutions with seeming ease is at an end. We need to dismantle our denial around leadership and reconstruct our view aligned with a new reality.

Peter Block, management consultant and author, is also adamant that our romanticised notion of leadership as a projection of all our positive fantasies around position, rank and power is the core problem, and one that needs to be confronted.

In looking for this mythical saviour to lead and take responsibility for all our problems, we inherently do not need to own any of this ourselves. The other problem is that no leader can ever live up to the expectations we project onto them and so, inevitably, they fail and we blame and crucify them.

I am not sure I have read anything in the newspapers about our great leadership in South Africa, but rather about the corruption, mistakes and failures. Neither am I aware of a dinner party where people talk glowingly about their boss and how valued and supported they feel. Mostly, all we hear are complaints and ridiculing about overpaid managers who have no idea what happens at a grassroots level.

A space for greater levels of collective leadership with recognition for the follower relationship and shared dialogue is needed.

The call for a new approach to leadership began 20 years ago, involving a paradigm shift that changes our understanding of leadership so that it makes sense in a post-industrial world.

Embracing their humanity

This concept of leadership means that in addition to embracing their own humanity, which is

collectively take responsibility for creating the organisation's future. These citizens, as opposed to employees, are core members of an organisational community in pursuit of a common purpose, with both responsibilities and rights.

A community is a space to which a person belongs and which belongs to no one individual.

Barbara Nussbaum, a thought leader on the subject of ubuntu, describes the beginnings of a movement from separateness to oneness that we are seeing in the 21st century, and which is necessarily accompanied by a shift in the focus from a celebration of the individual as a hero and leader to an understanding of the necessity of developing collective awareness of the group as an art form, and the capacity and desire for a more relational way of being as worldwide trends.

We all need to be citizens of our organisation, to be empowered to feel it is our responsibility to make a contribution and not to feel that we are victims of a system being led by some incompetent leader who bullies us into ways of being (or should that be 'ways of doing'?) which make us feel used and abused.

High-performance culture

However, in order for us to be able to step into our role as a citizen, to be free to think creatively and innovate our ways of working, and ultimately operate in a high-performance culture, we need to have an environment that supports this.

So, consider that the quality of everything that we as human beings do depends on the quality of the thinking we do first – that the key performance outcomes and the success of any business unit's targets are based on the actions that employees take to achieve their goals and that the actions they take are driven by the thinking they do about the actions they need to take.

Seriously? How much time do we spend in organisations thinking about how we work, thinking about the best solution to a challenge, thinking about what it would mean to do things differently?

Remember, we are mostly human doings, not human beings; so taking the time to think is unimaginable. In fact, the fast-paced, pressure-driven culture of most organisations actually rewards the opposite of this – they reward outputs, not thinking. But this is exactly what

then stands in the way of our innovation and generative thinking.

Our brains shut down in the presence of pressure and criticism and go into a mode of self-preservation. The adrenalin and cortisol flow from out limbic systems, shouting 'fight or flee'!

In this space of amygdala hijack, no one is able to engage his or her prefrontal cortex and contemplate the newest mind-blowing idea.

Courage and grace

In her book, *Time to Think*, Nancy Kline shares her years of research around the importance of creating an environment to enable people to think for themselves – with rigour, imagination, courage and grace.
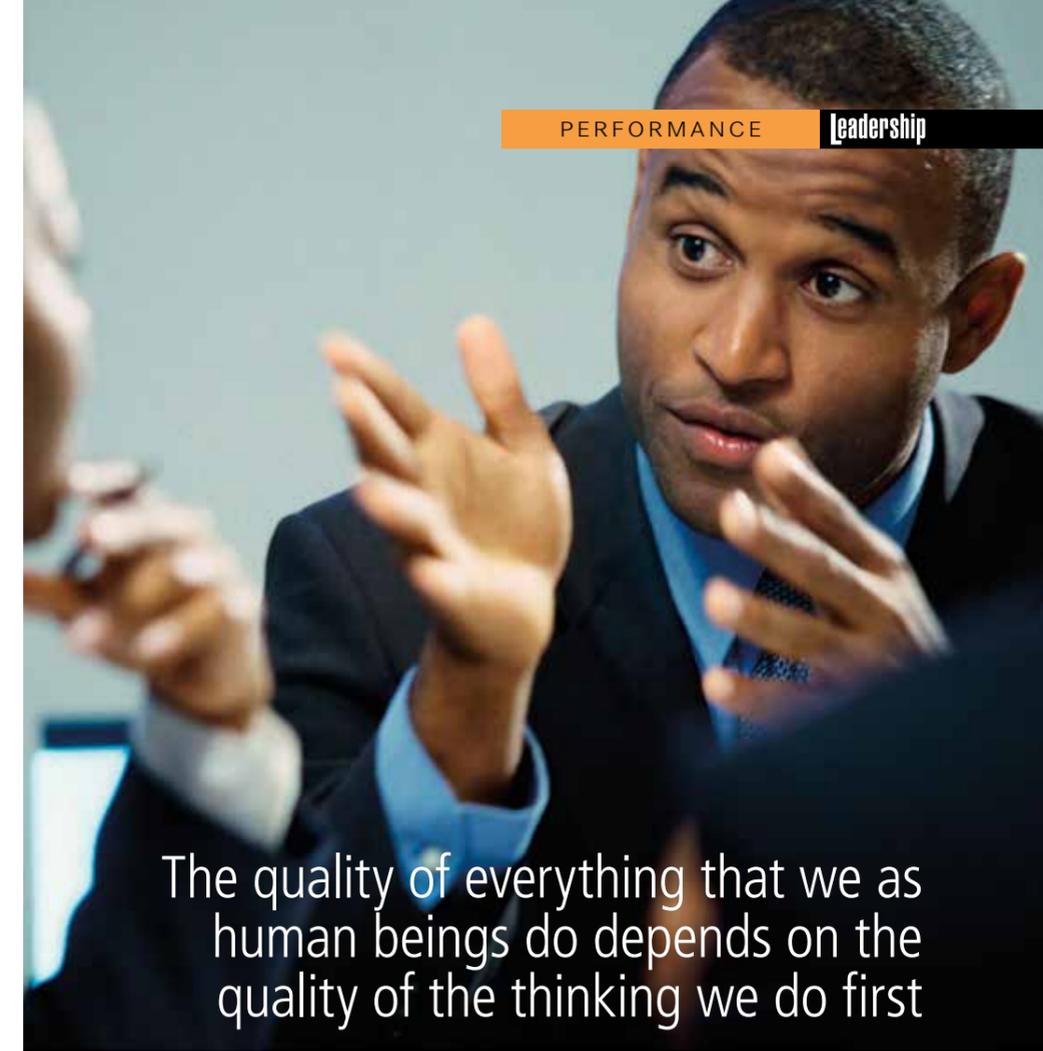
The most crucial factor in forming this ability to think well for yourself is directly related to how you are being treated by the people with you while thinking.

Creating the space and attention for the individual to think unleashes an opportunity for quality thinking, and thus people will experience a direct link to the quality of their results. This is what we want, right? Better results, better working relationships and a sense of being valued.

This environment is not difficult to create, but it does require us to acknowledge that we are first and foremost human beings and not human doings and so we need the space and the right context to be able to quiet the self-preservation mind and encourage the dopamine and serotonin to flow.

The quality of everything that we as human beings do depends on the quality of the thinking we do first

lives and from organisations by inferior ways of treating each other.

So the role of organisational development practitioners such as myself is to introduce the possibility of a Thinking Environment to

attention on delivery and the achievement of tasks. Leaders have been measured on these aspects and have been promoted when they have been successful, but more often than not criticised and reprimanded when they have been unsuccessful.

So to now focus on creating spaces for collective conversation, for shared ideas and diversity of perspectives, to encourage and value the thinking and creativity of their employees as an input to strategy and goal achievement is a challenge.

The idea of having a meeting where the outcome is a productive conversation as opposed to an action list of tasks is, for some people, revolutionary.

The question is: does organisational leadership want others to think for themselves? Do they want to relinquish their hierarchical leadership power? Do they want to break industrial Management 1.0 shackles? Do they want to create organisations fit for human life? ▲

Alison du Toit

"It is becoming evident that a different kind of leadership is needed – an era in which leadership can navigate the complexities and challenges of the 21st century"

A Thinking Environment is a set of conditions, ways of being together, under which people can think for themselves and think well together. This kind of space is natural to our humanity, but unfortunately rare. It has been marginalised and dismissed from our

organisations. It is also to challenge and confront leadership and wake people up to their dependence on hierarchical power and the need to be doing at the expense of being.

This all too often feels counterintuitive to them, as there has been so much focus and

the responsibility of every individual, the core task of leaders is to create the conditions for civic or institutional engagement.

The leader's task is to structure the place and experience of these occasions to move the organisational culture toward shared ownership. Shared leadership is the property of the whole

system and not of individuals, and therefore effectiveness in leadership is the result of the connections and relationships between the parts and not due to any one part of the system, such as the individual leader.

Leadership in the future should be distributed among diverse individuals and teams who