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The Subtle Art of Disruption: Understanding and embodying what it means to be a Disruptive Leader

The Subtle Art of Disruption

Issue 11, April 2018

The term 'Disruptive Leadership' erupted in popularity about the same time as the word 'Innovation' reared its head in trendy big-business vernacular. And, quite frankly, it is as widely misunderstood and misquoted as the latter term. Both are often touted to be these larger-than-life, immediate and transformational changes, replete with bells and whistles. As a result of this bad press, they are also commonly viewed as other-worldly, or something 'big and scary.' This leads people to view them as unattainable or distant to their own lives and own realm of possibility.

While the two terms are correlated, the focus for this Edition is Disruptive Leadership. I do not delve into the notion of leadership further on, so I'll unpack that now. When I speak of 'leadership' I mean the capacity to influence others. This is not confined to a job title or role, and in some cases the two are inversely correlated! Leadership is available to all of us, at any age and stage of our careers.

Similarly, to 'disrupt' refers to altering a course of action, system or structure. Therefore, Disruptive Leadership is the capacity we have to influence others, resulting in a behaviour change, thus disrupting the 'status quo'.

I pose 4 key characteristics for understanding and embodying Disruption and these are applicable in all domains and relationships in our life. I purposely use the terms 'understanding' and 'embodying' because one is the cognitive knowing and the other points to its application and capacity to live it. We can have 'cognitive knowing' without application and that isn't much use for creating change. Both are necessary.

The four characteristics I pose in this Edition are:

- The art of Disruption is both subtle and personal
- Powerful cultural (and relationship) shifts occur because of 'social osmosis' and this shift (Disruption) can begin purposefully with you
- Fear is a normal response to Disruption. Use it to keep you sharp, not to keep you small
- Disruption means being a responsible owner/operator of our capacities and stepping into a space of self-actualisation



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Understanding and Embodying Disruptive Leadership

1. Disruption is both subtle and personal

With much rhetoric around Disruption and Disruptive Leadership, people have a common misconception that Disruption needs to be big or major. It's often linked to disruptive technologies like driverless cars, or disruptive design like the current trend towards Activity Based Work Environments.

However to be positively Disruptive, you and I do not need to negotiate a billion dollar deal between Uber and Volvo, nor redesign

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our work environment to bridge the societal expectation-gap between the industrialist era and the humanist era. We do not need to do anything outwardly major to create incredibly powerful change. In fact, the opposite is true. We can simply 'BE' and in doing so, model innovation, courage and possibility. By this, I mean we can step fully and responsibly into the only capacities that we can ever completely control and be wildly influential. **These capacities are what we think, feel, say and do.**

The following 3 characteristics unpack and expand this absolutely essential point: Disruption in any environment begins with us. It begins with us showing up fully and responding to what we want to happen rather than reacting to social and environmental cues. This moves us to a position of 'leader' as opposed to 'follower' and we can make incredibly powerful changes that begin with actualised, personal responses.

2. The biggest and most powerful cultural shifts occur because of social osmosis- and this starts with us!

By 'social osmosis', I am referring to the primarily unconscious social and peer cues we get from each other that tell us what is ok and what is not ok in any given environment. These unconscious cues are incredibly strong and moderate much of our behaviour. In fact, this mechanism is how we learn to behave in a 'socially acceptable way'.

Consider how varied the rules are for human behaviour given our rapidly changing contexts. The behaviour that would be considered appropriate for a meeting would be considered ridiculous if then transferred to the context of catching up with friends at a pub. Yet no-one needed to sit us down and explain the 'rules' for all of these interactions and contexts. We pick up the cues from those around us and act accordingly.

Similarly, we are certainly quick to pick up when someone is not following social convention. We would not have to verbally confer with each other or check our 'Human Interaction Guidebooks'. We just know because we are picking up cues and other associated 'emotional data' from our environment continually and reacting to it.

This is also how we get 'socially rewarded'- we simply pick up cues from others that they are pleased with our behaviour and interactions. This is the very phenomena that leads to Group Think- where people reduce themselves to saying or doing what they think will be socially accepted or rewarded by others present.

Groupthink



'Social osmosis' is why policies do not shift behaviour. People do. Just consider Activity Based Work Environments. Regardless of the change in the physical environment and even the introduction of policies about cleaning up and removing personal items at the end of the day, most people will just do what they've always done unless a few 'leaders'- people with social capital- model something different.

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I know a building that changed to Activity Based Working Environments and all that really changed is that many people started arriving earlier to claim their favourite seat. After a while, spots were known, covertly, as Jerry's or Kate's seat. There were not enough people 'doing the new thing' in the environment to model the change. There was not enough social Disruption to actually change behaviour. I had a similar personal experience managing an environmental transition about a decade ago with the same results. No one in the executive team, nor team members with social capital modelled the new way. Because no-one actually disrupted their personal habits, people followed the old status quo despite the new environmental cues. Yet these same initiatives have been successful in environments where the social cues indicate that 'the new thing' is what is socially rewarded.

Think about the enormity of that... People actually give themselves permission to respond freely after just one person offers a different answer!



In this way, workplace culture is akin to a line of dominoes. Behaviours need to line up to maintain a 'culture' or maintain the status quo. If we shift one domino (behaviour) even a little bit, the line of dominoes cannot fall in the same way. It is disrupted. Similarly, drop a pebble in the water and it makes ripples far from where it was dropped. If no-one actually steps up and shifts a domino, the culture remains the same. Policies, procedures, values statements, mission statements are all generally useless unless people see each other doing this new thing.

There was a study that was done in the US that has subsequently been replicated with the same results. This study asked actors to indicate an incorrect answer publically, to see what the lay person would answer. 80% of the time, the lay person gave the obviously incorrect answer because they were responding to the social cues more strongly than they were responding to what they knew to be the right answer. This is scary stuff when we think about the potential for organisational behaviour. Yet, when one actor was asked to give the correct answer prior to the lay person speaking, this percentage dropped down to only 5.5%. With one dissenter in the mix, the lay person was far more likely to indicate the answer they knew to be correct. This means that one person providing a different answer enabled social permission for others to do the same. Think about the enormity of that- just one person stating a different response drastically reduced Group Think and completely changed the outcome. People actually gave themselves permission to respond freely after just one person spoke a tiny sentence.

Social cues change behaviours. To create powerful levels of Disruption, a subtle behaviour change is all that is necessary. To be the Disrupter, we just have to be the one to make the first move. But 'shifting the domino' takes courage...

3. Fear is a normal human response. Use it to keep you sharp, not to keep you small.

Neuro-typical humans have a limbic response when we encounter external stimulus. Our cognitive, rational brain- the cerebral cortex- kicks in later. This means that our reactions are inherently emotional. Our limbic brain is assessing whether a stimulus is a threat or a reward. If the limbic brain detects a threat, depending on the size of the threat, it can kick into Fight/Flight mode.

If it's not a seismic threat, the limbic system will tell the brain to go on 'alert'. The higher the threat, the more we retreat into 'survival mode' and react rather than respond. This, back in caveman days, was a very important survival mechanism. It kept us alert to the threats in our immediate environment and kept us in a state where we could react quickly to save ourselves should the need arise.

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However this evolutionary facet of our cognition is not always a helpful one. We don't need the same chemicals or reactions in the way that we once did because the threats we are reacting to in our lives today are rarely lions, tigers and bears. Today's threats are primarily social, yet the brain still responds in the same way. We get threat responses to social rejections, people's opinions of us, and even the thought of their potential negative opinion can be enough to send us into a panic. The brain detects social threats in the environment and it screams, "Panic, panic! Don't move, don't draw attention to yourself!" So we stay small. We don't act. We don't speak. And we can literally self-induce this state by just thinking that someone is thinking badly of us. How clever are we!? This reminds me of Mark Twain's quote: I've been through some terrible things in my life- some of which actually happened!



Similarly, as an avid Alice in Wonderland fan, this also reminds me of when Alice reunites with the Mad Hatter and he is not convinced that Alice is actually Alice. "You're not the same as before" he muses, eyeing her closely. "You used to be much more...muchier. You've lost your muchness. In there (he points to her heart), there is something missing." He is of course referring to the enveloping indoctrination she has received about what she 'should' and 'should not' be doing, thinking, saying and feeling which has resulted in her losing her 'muchness' by trying to behave as she 'should' rather than in a way that feels authentic to her.

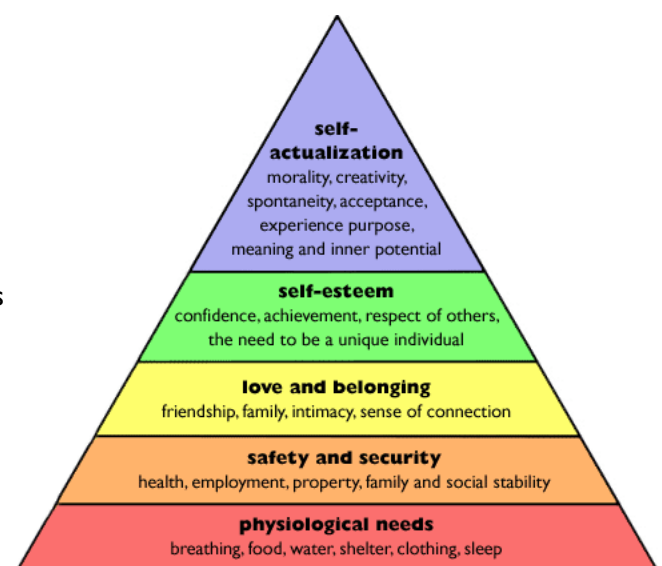
So what is the missing 'muchness' for Alice? Abraham Maslow would describe this as Self-Actualisation...

4. Disruption means being a responsible owner/operator of our capacities and stepping into self-actualisation

Self-actualisation is the capacity to step fully into one's real capacities and show up in a complete and authentic way. It means responsibly using all of our knowledge, skills, strengths, intuition and thus, actualising our potential.

Contrary to popular belief, self actualisation does not actually refer to becoming something we could 'potentially' be if we tried enough and improved our skills, got better trained, etc. It simply means showing up fully, with all of the 'stuff' we have right now. The distance between us and our potential at any given time is simply the gap between showing up fully and showing up compromised. The latter occurs when we alter what we want to say or do to fit in to the environment. James Hollis (2018) puts it this way: "We become too often a servant of our environment, given our need to fit in, receive the approval of others, stay out of harms way."

As you can see on the diagram, Maslow's Hierarchy places physical needs like food, water and safety at the bottom of the pyramid and psychological needs including belonging, esteem, love and reputation in the middle. Self-actualisation transcends and includes these. If we get caught by the earlier stages, like worried about food or thinking about other people's reactions, we hold ourselves back. We stay small and this means we are also being under-responsible for ourselves.



As mentioned earlier, we can only ever control four things in life: what we say, what we do, what we feel and what we think. When we take responsibility for these four 'powers' we have a healthy level of responsibility. We will

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consider others, so as not to cause offense or harm, but we are not caught by our own need to please and fit in. Conversely, we are under-responsible when we do not step fully into these four 'powers'. We hand over our responsibility to other people and we allow them to dictate our choices. We might not realise that this is what we are doing, but it is. Not so great to see it in black and white, is it?

To really self-actualise we have to override our very human urges to play it safe and stay small. This means listening to our human fear yelling out to us, but recognising that this is a cognitive glitch in our evolution that we haven't surpassed yet. Our brain is trying to alert us to actual physical danger in the environment, and it's just confusing the emotional data with a real threat.

Self-actualisation is being a responsible owner/operator of all of our own stuff. Can you imagine telling an iPhone just to act like a Nokia 5150? No! That would be such a waste. Yet this is what we do to ourselves every day. We quiet our skills, ideas and our potential and show up as far less than we are. Shhh.... we're playing small. No-one will notice I'm not really a Nokia...

What would you do if you weren't held back by fear of other people's opinions or comments, or even the thoughts of other people's opinions, and just allowed yourself to show up completely and fully? And how disruptive do you think that could be? Think of the examples you could set for others and how comfortable you would make it for others to follow suit? Remember the experiment mentioned previously- 80%-5.5% with just one dissenter.

Disruption occurs when we fully show up because we make it safe for others to do the same. We channel creativity, innovation and courage. We should never underestimate the positive Disruption we can create simply by showing up fully. It's so rarely done in an authentic way that when people see someone else really show up, it is inspiring! We gravitate towards these people because they give us permission to realise our own potential. Alternatively, we run for hills because they challenge our sense of safety by showing us what 'showing up' really looks like.

In summary, I draw on the wisdom of James Hollis (2018): *"Our life begins twice: the day we are born and the day we accept the radical existential fact that our life, for all its delimiting factors, is essentially ours to choose. And the moment when we open to that invitation and step into that accountability we take on the power of choice... This is what is asked of us, to show up as the person we really are, as best as we can manage under circumstances over which we may have no control. This showing up as best as we can is growing up. That is all life really asks of us: to show up as best we can. If we are to show up, we must make choices and stop whining. In those moments, something shifts inside. We experience our life as more fully alive than it has been at any other hour".*

In Conclusion:

Put simply, to be an effective Disruptive Leader, we simply have to step into our 'muchness' and watch the rest take care of itself. This is exactly the same as a pebble hitting water. Once the pebble hits the water, the pebble's job is done. It does not have to do anything else except be a pebble. Yet it's ripples can be seen for metres from where it landed.

This is the very subtle art of Disruption- simply showing up, standing in our 'muchness' and taking responsibility for our choices.



Abby Elizabeth Rees is PunkPDs director, a self-confessed 'education junkie', University Lecturer, Education and Empowerment Writer, Behaviour and Change Specialist, Executive Meta-Coach and artistic thinker.

Energy, Excellence and Tenacity capture Abby's drive and personality.

Thriving on new challenges to design for education and change, Abby leads with a level of energy that earned her the nickname '240' (240 Volt) from her former colleagues. With the tenacity of a Rottweiler, Abby lives and breathes her design projects, providing her clients with a commitment to excellence that is unparalleled. Abby has a lively personal presence, strong interpersonal skills and uses a wide range of innovative and inventive techniques. With rich experience in facilitating diverse groups, Abby has delivered a range of corporate training and developed education, change and communication tools to meet individual needs.

In addition to being recognised with numerous National and International awards for her work, Abby embodies the cliché of 'life-long-learning' and has achieved:

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