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Thoughts from Staff College.....the third in our new series of Faculty blogs

Where does leadership take us?

Captain David Lilley, Royal Navy

Following on from our previous blogs on wicked issues and how leaders can make that decisive difference, one of the key development leadership principles at Staff College is to understand the importance of learning through taking risk, whether for it is for ourselves, our teams or the organisations/systems in which we live and work. With complex problems with ambiguity, uncertainty and without the full picture around us, Leaders learn to drive a path forward, having the confidence in their people that they can make things better. Maybe you know that feeling where you have recently let your direct reports get on with it, trusting them to achieve the “what” through a thorough understanding of the “why”?

A more experiential approach to learning allows us to develop both our “Ps and Qs” as Reg Revans, the founder of many Action Learning principles^[1], described. It is the important difference between Programmed Knowledge (knowledge that is already established, often as we read in books) and Questioning Insight (**questioning to create insight into what we see, hear, or feel**). How many leaders do you know who have emerged after their dismal performance at school or university because they realised that only through living that they learnt well? From my flying career, I learnt that, whilst programmed knowledge helped me get into the air, it was questioning insight that helped me become a capable aviator.

A good learning organisation should, therefore, allow people to experiment and equip them in taking appropriate risk. Having the courage to speak up, share thoughts or personal vulnerabilities might be how risk manifests itself in your life? Throughout my Naval service I noticed how some officers developed themselves into better leaders. With opportunities to test, learn and correct they naturally became more comfortable with themselves and others in them.

*“I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man **is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.**”*

Nelson Mandela

*“**Courage** is not merely a virtue; it is **the** virtue. Without it there are no other virtues.... all the rest don't become virtues until it takes courage to exercise them. Courage is not only the basis of all virtue; it is its expression. True, you may be bad and brave, but **you can't be good without being brave.**”*

Field Marshal Sir William Slim

So, it is not too late to perhaps re-learn that without courage and without taking a risk life will pass through your hands like sand. We should try and consider this throughout

our lives and especially promote that idea in all those that we lead. Like everything in that we do, however, it is our choice. Take that choice, favour opportunity and your leadership journey will be unlikely to ever look back.

[\[1\]](#) ABC of Action Learning Reg Revans Routledge, 201