

John Deffenbaugh blog – Awareness and Responsibility

Xi Jinping has been in the headlines recently. As the new president of China, chairman of the Central Military Commission and secretary general of the Chinese Communist Party, he heads a country of 1.3b. What grabbed the recent headlines was not so much his appointment, but rather his disappearance for 13 days in the run-up to his appointment.

It's really difficult for leaders to vanish nowadays. It's also not very helpful. Ok, if you're the leader of China then there are ways that things are done around there that are different from the NHS (some of you may quibble with that point). But leaders generally want to do the reverse. Look at the difference in leadership style that Obama displayed in contrast to Bush Jr when responding to hurricanes Sandy and Katrina respectively. Obama learned the lesson, and some pundits say that is what turned the election.

Top Leaders can learn from Xi Jinping, arguably by not vanishing. It was Peters and Waterman in their 1980 book *Search for Excellence* who codified the visibility of leadership, calling it '**management by wandering around**', or simply MBWA (it seems that everything has to be abbreviated). The benefits of getting out and about are so obvious they don't need to be stated. Rather, it's worthwhile reflecting on recent examples of leaders who did not get out and about, sometimes in the sense of lacking basic curiosity about the key components of their business:

- Nick Buckles of G4S didn't know til the last moment that their flagship contract was going pear shaped
- George Entwistle of the BBC did not enquire about the circumstances of the cancelled Jimmy Savile Newsnight expose, nor the one that should have been cancelled
- Robert Francis QC will no doubt have something to say about the awareness that leaders in Mid Staffs had about what was going on under their noses

MBWA is not just a management abbreviation. In some respects making it an abbreviation devalues what is meant here. It's about getting out of the office, speaking to customers and staff, finding out what's going on. Curiosity. Feargal Quinn, the founder of Superquinn supermarkets in Ireland observed:

I used to hold meetings in the aisles of my supermarkets. Customers would constantly interrupt to talk to me, to give me feedback. Then I'd attend meetings back in the office with colleagues who spend all their time compiling customer research and wading through consumer behaviour reports. And I'd tell them things about our customers I'd picked up from random conversations in the aisles. And they'd say "We didn't know that."

What is it you don't know? I reckon that insight to this question is the only decent thing that came out of Donald Rumsfeld's tenure as Secretary of Defence:

Reports that say something that has not happened are always interesting to me because as we know, there are *known knowns*; there are things we know we know. We also know there are *known unknowns*; that is to say there are things we know we don't know. But there are also *unknown unknowns* – the ones we don't know we don't know.

My point caller? Get out and about and have the curiosity to find out the unknown unknowns. Nick Buckles wished he did; George Entwistle sure does. Your peers in Mid Staffs probably didn't get it. This is because they lacked awareness. This is what I do through coaching – build awareness first, then responsibility. Simple as that. If you're not aware, then there is no way you can be responsible.

Do you have a coach? I doubt Xi Jinping does. NHS Top Leaders offers coaching support. Go ahead, build your awareness and responsibility.

John Deffenbaugh 23 Nov 2012