

John Deffenbaugh blog – True to yourself

Alexandra Dubcek started the Prague Spring 45 years ago. What he instigated in Czechoslovakia has given name to the Arab Spring movement over the past couple of years.

Dubcek was a party apparatchik who became First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in January 1968. There was nothing in his career through the party ranks that indicated he would embark on the far-reaching market and human rights reforms that he instigated over the months until the Soviet tanks rolled into town that August.

It was truly an inspirational time. It was not until '71 that I managed to get a visa for Czechoslovakia, but the length of my hair at the border post was somewhat longer than my visa picture, so alas I didn't manage to visit Prague til the Iron Curtain came down.

But there was also a foreboding that summer of '68. The parallels with the Arab Spring are there for everyone to see, with the tanks on the streets of Cairo as I write. What Dubcek sought to achieve was so far outside the political framework of the time that he was exposed, forced to resign, and became a forestry inspector. Dubcek achieved a Pyrrhic victory, however, when he was elected Chairman of the Czechoslovak Parliament after the Velvet Revolution.

NHS leaders can learn a lot from Alexander Dubcek. First is what Mark Moore tells us about Public Value, and the necessity for leaders to understand the '**authorising environment**' in which they operate. Moore describes this as the "sources of legitimacy and support" that leaders can rely on to provide the authorisation and resources in their pursuit of change. Put simply, ask yourself: "who provides my covering fire?" There was no one there for Dubcek. Will there be for you?

Second is what I call your **Dubcek Strategy**. This is about how you progress your career in an environment (sadly all too prevalent in the NHS) which is impervious to change, has leaders above you who don't want to be challenged, and who only recruit and promote 'people like us'. How on earth do you progress up the ladder in this type of environment without going native, yet remaining true to yourself?

Dubcek did it, so can you. But it will be a tricky balance. You have to conform enough to get promoted on the back of substantive achievements, and the type behaviours that are seen as essential to getting things done. Yet the behaviours that might be needed are those to which you cannot in all conscience align yourself. That's ok, because the people you manage will respond to the leadership you give them. Your problem will be your peers, who might try to send you to Coventry because you're not like them. Your achievements will go a long way to addressing this, as will your building of a movement of like-minded leaders and followers who are open to change. You can also draw on the energy of your mentor who can provide covering fire in the organisation, or advice from outwith.

Third is the **energy** you draw from those who love and care for you. In their article about "Ethical failure of successful leaders", Ludwig and Longenecker give some advice to successful leaders: "**Family, relationships and interests other than work must be cultivated for long-term success to be meaningful**". And as Prof Randy Pausch said in his Carnegie Mellon Last Lecture: "**When you're screwing up and nobody is saying anything to you anymore, that means they gave up. When you see yourself doing something badly and nobody bothers to tell you anymore, that's a very bad place to be. Your critics are the ones telling you they still love you and care.**"

So if a Dubcek Strategy is your way ahead, then get yourself some covering fire and draw on those you love to support you. It could be a long and challenging journey as you remain true to yourself til you get that key job and you can be the leader you want to be.

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