

40 LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP
FROM
TRANSFORMING OLYMPUS



Lessons from a new leadership novel
by

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*'Zeus certainly leads by example,' said Hera.
'Unfortunately, it is rarely the example we need if we are to transform Olympus.'*

Imagine if the Greek Gods woke up one day and realised they needed to change the way they lead the cosmos if they were to avoid the worst fate that an immortal could possibly face: eternal irrelevance.

They would need to start behaving as mentors rather than puppeteers. They would need to make life better for the humans below rather than merely observing them from afar.

The way they led the Cosmos would need to change.

The leadership team of Olympus itself would need to change.

But how?

The gods could learn a great deal from us mortals, especially when it comes to leadership.

For if you want extraordinary leadership and extraordinary leadership teams: action-oriented, compassionate and genuinely emotionally intelligent leadership that delivers exceptional and

sustainable results - for that ...

You need to be human.

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40 lessons in leadership from *Transforming Olympus*

Lessons in leadership for today's politicians, captains of industry and, more importantly, the leader inside every one of us.

Leadership Philosophy

Lesson 1: Gods make terrible leaders. Don't act like one.

As Athena admitted to Hera, gods, mortal or otherwise, make terrible leaders. They are all-knowing or believe they are. They think they have all the answers, but they don't. They can't. No-one does. And no-one should expect them to. They command. They control. And they ultimately fail.

Be an inclusive leader. One who enables and empowers others to achieve things they didn't even realise were possible.

Lesson 2: It's not about you.

Narcissistic leaders like the pre-enlightened Zeus, Archie from Part 2, and an exhausting number of world leaders, stand out - and not in a good way. Everything is about them. They may dupe some people into following them for a while, but their reigns inevitably end in tears or ignominy or both. Don't be like them. Leadership is not about the leader. David Chiem, Asia's 2022 Most influential Entrepreneur and the inventor of the superb phrase that sums up psychological safety so sublimely, "*Zero Fear 100% Respect*", has another pithy phrase that is ideal for this occasion: "*As a leader, it is 100% not about you – and 100% about you*". In other words, leadership is all about your people, but they take their cues from your attitude and how you behave.

Lesson 3: You are a steward. Leave a legacy.

What is your legacy going to be? The best leadership ethos bar none is 'Stewardship' which I define as seeking to leave your part of the organisation in a better state than you found it. This is as true in life as it is in business. It is relevant whether we are talking about a marriage, a family, a scout troupe, a sports club, a church congregation, a group of friends, a small business, a team, a division, a department, an entire organisation or indeed a nation. How are you going to leave your team, your organisation, in a better state than it was when you joined it?

Lesson 4: The quality of your leadership is up to you – not those above you.

Athena explained this concept to the Olympians very clearly. Poor leadership stops with you. If those above you are poor leaders, if they are terrible at leading change, it stops with you. You may not be able to do much about the way they lead but you are completely in control of the way you lead. Your people deserve to be led well.

Lesson 5: Leadership is not about hierarchy. It is about influence.

Poor leaders like Barron rely solely on their formal, hierarchical authority. They fool themselves into believing that their position provides them with all the power they need. Extraordinary leaders like Helen and Dana don't do this. They know that achieving extraordinary results requires influencing people, not commanding them. Some of the best leaders I know have no or only a few people reporting to them. They reach out across their organisation – up, down and sideways, and influence people to deliver together.

Lesson 6: EQ is twice as important as IQ.

As Dev came to realise in Part Two, it doesn't matter how academically clever you may be. What matters is whether you can influence people to deliver. Be an emotionally intelligent leader; a leader who delivers extraordinary and sustainable results. Develop every one of the five EQ components: Self-Awareness, Self-Control, Empathy, Relationship Management and Motivation.

Lesson 7: What are you trying to achieve – and why?

Without a clarity of purpose and desired outcomes, the Olympians could never have achieved as much as they did in their quest to transform Olympus. Give people the clarity they need to engage and deliver. Clarity of *what* (both the numbers and the narrative) and clarity of *why*. We humans don't change simply because we are told to, we only genuinely change, we only genuinely deliver our all if and when we *want* to. We need to know why.

Lesson 8: There is a right reason and a real reason for everything.

As Hera explained to Zeus in Chapter 3, there are two types of reasons for almost everything: real reasons and right reasons. The 'real' reason is usually self-centred. It is personal and laden with emotion. It is often the what-is-in-it-for-me reason. The 'right' reason in any situation is based on the welfare of the object of the change: the welfare of the business, your customers (or in the case of the Greek Gods, the mortals below), your people. Both reasons are valid, and if we want people to change, we must address both of them.

Lesson 9: Leadership is a team game not a solo pursuit.

Leadership teams exist at all levels of an organisation. The best leadership teams are synergistic: they create far greater value than the sum of their parts. As Zeus tried to do, and as Hank, Helen and Dana succeeded in doing - build a team of leaders who value one another, who look for diverse viewpoints and perspectives, who celebrate the fact that their individual weaknesses are offset by their colleagues' strengths. Build a team that possesses all of *The 9 Components of Extraordinary Leadership Teams*. A team with strong foundations (*Respect* and *Shared Objectives*). A team with strong pillars (*Trust, Commitment, Constructive Disagreement* and *Active Listening* that all add up to *Psychological Safety*) and a strong roof (*Accountability* and *Delivery of Results*). A team that delivers better results together and sets the tone for the rest of the organisation.

Lesson 10: Create more leaders not more followers.

A grand test of a leader is their ability to develop others; their desire and their ability to create more leaders. Hire people who can do the things you don't do well. Develop people to be even better than you are. Enable people to fulfil their potential. Develop successors. Not only will it help you to feel good about yourself, it will help you, them and the organisation to be as successful as possible.

Lesson 11: Don't forget to deliver.

A critical leadership trait, one that is too often glossed over in any number of leadership texts, theories and books, is that a leader's job is to deliver. Through people. *How* you deliver is obviously of critical importance, but for Zeus' sake, don't forget to deliver.

Lesson 12: Don't be afraid to make the decision.

Engage with people, obviously. Seek out their views. Listen to understand the meaning behind their words. But let it be clear how decisions are going to be made. Thank them for their input, with utmost sincerity, and then make the decision.

Strategy

Lesson 13: Clarity of strategy, agility in delivery.

Your vision of the future or your mission for the organisation must be crystal clear – to your people. Give them clarity of what you want to achieve and why. Like Zeus. Like Dana. But be flexible in delivery. Engage your people regarding how you will all deliver the future. Not only will this make sure they want to deliver, as they won't be delivering your strategy, they will be delivering theirs, you will end up with a far better result. They know things you don't.

Lesson 14: What is your 'strategic core'?

As Onya explained to the Plutonians, strategy is neither a spreadsheet nor a to-do list. It is an articulation of a future state plus a roadmap to get there. And without a 'strategic core', it will fail. Your strategic core consists of: a) Your Purpose – why the organisation/team/initiative exists, and for whom. Your Purpose is what will get your people bounding out of bed in the morning. It will help guide you and your people when making decisions. It will guide how everyone behaves. b) Your Magic – what makes you special, what do you want to be famous for and what is your overriding ethos? c). Your Benefits – how you will benefit every one of its stakeholders: your people, your customers, your partners, your suppliers, your shareholders and perhaps even society at large.

Lesson 15: Think in phases.

If you try to deliver everything at once, nothing will be delivered. As Dana did with the Plutonians in Chapter 25, think in phases, with each phase staggered to start a little later than the previous one. (Dana's phases were Phase One: Five Star Fundamentals, Phase Two: Expand Propositions, Phase Three: Expand into Europe.) And learn to prioritise. Nothing is ever perfect. Do the most important things first. Which will mean saying no to things. Yes, this is all much easier to say than do.

Lesson 16: What are the implications? What are the consequences?

As I discussed in *The Change Catalyst*, and Dana explains in *Transforming Olympus*, 88% of changes fail. A similar number of strategies, mergers and acquisitions suffer the same fate. And a big reason is that the change leaders don't dare to think about, let alone address, what could possibly go wrong. And yet, every decision has consequences, every change has implications. And even good change is only *net* good. There are downsides to everything. Work with your people to identify as many of these as possible before embarking on the new change journey. This is not a sign of weakness; it is a sign of strength.

Lesson 17: Look for the magic.

Learn from the Romans in Chapter 13. When you set about changing something, first stop to identify the 'magic': the unique characteristics and positives of how things are done today; and stop to understand why they are done that way. Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. This is doubly true when it comes to mergers and acquisitions. Too few organisations stop to remind themselves of why they acquired the business in the first place. The reasons beyond the balance sheet. What is special about the culture, the customer experience, their IT systems, their approach to product development... Identify the magic, nurture it, protect it, embrace it. The majority of mergers and acquisitions destroy value, and the main reason is that they forget to do this. The business case forecast that one plus one was going to equal three, yet, when the dust settles, it so often ends up adding up to much less than two. Don't ignore the magic.

Lesson 18: Consensus is not the goal, arriving at the best course of action is.

Consensus can be a dirty word. The last thing you need is a room full of nodding dogs: a team that continually agrees with one another. You want constructive disagreement. You want different viewpoints, diverse perspectives. You want genuine engagement. Then you want agreement on a course of action. You want action, not compliance.

Change

Lesson 19: If you are not leading change, you are not leading anything.

Leadership is leading change. Otherwise you will merely be *managing* the status quo as it unravels around you. Enable people to embrace change and proactively embrace change yourself. Change is inevitable. It is the only constant. Become an extraordinary leader of change.

Lesson 20: Articulate a clear and compelling reason for the change.

If you want people to change, genuinely change, you need to articulate a clear and compelling reason to change. Hera and Zeus' reason for change was to try to help the Olympians avoid the worst fate for any immortal: eternal irrelevance. Humans and gods alike will only fully embrace change if and when we want to. We require a need to change that convinces our logical minds and captures our emotional hearts, for emotion is so much more powerful than logic when it comes to change.

Lesson 21: Emotion trumps logic every time.

Emotion is four times more powerful than logic when it comes to engaging people in any new initiative. For people to give you their all, they must *want* to deliver, they must *want* to change. To address this want you will need to appeal to their emotions. Logic will only get them, and you, 20% of the way there.

Lesson 22: Unearth the fears.

We all have our own individual fears when it comes to change. Some of them we don't even admit to ourselves. This poses a dilemma for leaders for it is our job to help people to overcome their fears of change. So, how on earth should we go about accomplishing this? Start with *challenges*. Once you have spelled out the new vision, the new mission, the outcomes you wish to achieve, and why, one of the first questions to ask everyone whose help you need to design and implement the new initiative is: "What are the key challenges to us achieving this?" Challenges are objective, therefore a great place to start. Then you can move on to get a little subjective and ask for *concerns*: "No change is perfect. What most concerns you about this new direction we are contemplating?" The answers to this question will be more personal and will give an insight to the underlying *fears* that may be lurking within. Dana did this quite brilliantly in Chapter 22.

Culture and People

Lesson 23: An organisation gets the culture that its leaders create; that you create.

Culture is critical. It powers everything. How your people behave and how they work together determines the quality of your products, the customer experience you deliver and the success of your organisation, no matter what type of organisation or part of an organisation you may lead. And you create the culture through everything you say and do. Don't leave culture to chance. Design it. Define it. Engage your people to build it. Whether you are in the position of leadership or influence in a big company, a small company, a department, a club or even a family – create the culture you all need to thrive, the culture everyone deserves and is yearning for. It's up to you.

Lesson 24: Set your people up to succeed.

You need your people. They are the ones who will be delivering the outcomes you desire. Set them up to succeed. Give them the clarity they need to deliver: clarity of outcomes, of who is responsible for what and how decisions will be made. Make sure the governance and the delivery processes are clear and commensurate with your culture and the size and type of the outcomes. Establish an environment in which they can think big, act small and scale fast. Enable them to try and fail; to learn from mistakes, make some changes and try again. Give them the confidence they need to believe they can do what you ask of them, and beyond. Give them the practical support they need: admin, IT, project management, training, coaching... and then get out of their way. 'How do I know what they need?' I hear you ask. Ask them. Trust them.

Lesson 25: Organisation design is so much more than structure.

Learn from Athena. If you are designing a new team, a new part of the business, a new department, a new organisation, don't start with structure, start with strategy. After all, that is what you are designing the organisation to deliver. Understand the implications of the strategy and design the operating model, culture, skills and people you will need before you get anywhere near an organisation chart. Once you do reach this stage, put forward several options and engage the people who will be impacted to spell out the pros and cons of each option – because no structure is perfect. (The same goes for democracy. We would take so much of the heat out of politics if we all paused to recognise that we are inevitably voting for the least worst option available to us.) Once you select a structure, you can then all work together on mitigating the cons you have all identified. And making it work.

Lesson 26: If you can't change the people, you may have to change the people.

Yes, our job as leaders is to develop our people, to help them to be the best they can be, to help them to want to change, to enable them to deliver exceptional things. But as Zeus and Dana both discovered, sometimes this just isn't possible. Perhaps the people in question are in the wrong place mentally, they do not have the capability to change, they do not possess the skills you need – there are myriad reasons. In this situation, it is better for the organisation and kinder for the person concerned, to allow them to move on.

Lesson 27: Complacency kills.

I used to think that complacency was a disease that only infected the successful, but I was wrong. It infects any organisation, large or small, that does the same thing in the same way time and time again. As the Olympians and the Plutonians will both attest: complacency is a killer. The good news is that there are two antidotes for it, two cures: continual improvement and innovation. Adopt them both. Seek to improve the things that are the highest priority for the business and the customer. But remove the blame from this process. Make sure no-one feels as though they might be blamed for not having changed earlier. 'The current way we do things is really good *and* we can do it even better' (note 'and' not 'but'). Also look for innovation opportunities, for ways to make step changes in the way things are done. If you stand still, you are going backwards.

Leadership Tips

Lesson 28: Own it.

Own your mistakes. Own your triumphs. Own what you do well. Own where you need to improve. Understand what you are accountable for, understand what you are responsible for, and own them. Identify the outcomes you would like to deliver (and why) and own them, even if you haven't been granted authority for them. If you know it needs to be done, reach out to others and make it happen. Own it.

Lesson 29: Act like a leader.

What is the best way to be promoted to a position of leadership? Start acting like one, just like Dana did in Part Two of the book. The best way to deliver an outcome you know the organisation needs? Assume the role of leadership and make it happen. Don't wait for the *leadership fairy* to wave her magic wand and anoint you. Make it easy for the powers that be to recognise your leadership potential. Start acting like one.

Lesson 30: Embrace your inner imposter.

Every good leader I know has felt like an imposter more than once in their careers. It is only natural when you are doing something for the first time. The poorest leaders I have encountered have taken one look at their new title and kidded themselves that they can live up to it from day one without any assistance or experience. Their imposter syndrome never leaves them for the simple reason that it remains unrecognised. Good leaders acknowledge their imposter and they put in the effort to learn and improve; to become as great a leader as they can possibly be.

Lesson 31: Celebrate being wrong.

Scientists love being wrong for that is how they discover the truth. This is how science advances. As Heracles explained to the Olympians in Chapter 11, confident leaders are not afraid to be proven wrong because their being wrong helps the team arrive at the truth. Don't be afraid to change tack when a better solution comes to light or when circumstances change. It doesn't demonstrate weakness as a leader, quite the opposite. The best leaders love being wrong.

Lesson 32: Appreciate the strength of humility.

Arrogant, bombastic leaders do not get the best from people. As Hera explained to Zeus in Chapter 3, 'Fear is a powerful motivator but not an eternal one.' Extraordinary leaders possess a degree of humility. This does not mean that they are shy or lacking in confidence, they simply realise that they don't have all the answers and do not have to hog the spotlight. They realise they achieve so much more when the spotlight is shared.

Lesson 33: Expect the unexpected.

No leader is immune from the law of unintended consequences. No-one can foresee all possible consequences of a decision or a change, so expect the unexpected. When they do arise, embrace them eagerly, without shame, without embarrassment, without judgement. With confidence.

Lesson 34: Delegate and empower.

Empowerment is different from delegation, even though both are key tools in any leader's armoury. Delegation is assigning tasks to people along with the responsibility of delivering specific results. It is instructive and task-oriented. Empowerment is establishing a culture for people to thrive within. It is about providing people with the tools, skills, confidence and psychological safety to use their initiative; to improve the way things are done without asking for permission at every step; to innovate. Both require the leader to be crystal clear about the outcomes they require. Both demand that the recipient accepts accountability for the delivery of the results. Delegation spells out how the results are to be delivered. Empowerment leaves the 'how' up to the person, underpinned by a deep trust in their capability, motivation and emotional intelligence.

Lesson 35: Avoid the blame game.

As Dana says in Chapter 22, there is a subtle but important difference between blame and accountability. The former leads us down a dead end. The latter focuses on what we do next. Too many people spend their careers and even their lives blaming others and trying to avoid being blamed for things themselves, both of which result in death spirals of underachievement. Instead of this pointless blame mindset, we need to own up when we make mistakes. We all make them. We need to ask for help when we need it, when we don't know how to do things, even when we think we should know how to do them. We need to accept accountability, face the facts, own the situation and work out what we need to do to make it good. And when it comes to others, start with the assumption that they have not stuffed up on purpose. It will make the world of difference.

Lesson 36: Replace 'failure' with a word everyone can learn from.

The word 'failure' is laden with negative emotions. Use it sparingly. 'Failure' is terminal; permanent. It marks the end of the thing in question. The Gods of Olympus failed in their quest. Divorce happens when a marriage fails. War is failure. In fact, this is the key lesson we humans should learn from every war, that the fact it occurs means we have failed. There are no winners from any war. But we don't learn any of this. "*That men do not learn much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons that history has to teach.*"¹

Sure, we *should* learn lessons from failure, but we rarely do. More often than not, we put them down to extraneous circumstances and move on, learning little from the experience. Why? Because failure is painful. It is a word overburdened with guilt and shame and blame. So many self-help and management gurus implore us to embrace failure, learn from failure, even learn how to fail. I get what they are trying to do but they are pushing against a closed door. A door that may open if we adopt a different approach. If we accept the reality of the matter: 'failure' is almost impossible to recover from or learn from. Instead, let's reserve this term for genuinely terminal events and use a completely different word for most times when things don't go as planned. A term that encourages us to stop and learn from the experience rather than sweeping it under the carpet. Words matter. Let's use *mistake* or *mishap* or *misstep*. Choose any comparable word that works for you. The Ritz Carlton suggests their people replace the word 'failure' with 'glitch', because a glitch is something they can recover from; something we can learn from. The Chicago Education Board has started replacing 'F' grades with 'NY' grades: Not Yet. You haven't failed, you just haven't passed yet. I really like this. *Not passing* is so much more empowering than *failing*. Yes, the subject may not be your forte, but there is no need to brand yourself a failure. To repeat – 'Failure' is terminal; permanent.

Choose a word that helps you to learn from the experience, make changes and move on – with confidence, free of shame or blame.

¹ Aldous Huxley (1894 – 1963). Author of *Brave New World* and countless other novels.

Lesson 37: Accept what you cannot control – and help your people to do the same.

There are things beyond our control. Accept this blinding glimpse of the obvious and the burden that this simple act will lift from your shoulders and mind will be enormous. As both teams did in the story to great success, make a list of the things that concern you, the things you wish were different. Then take three pieces of paper (or a flip chart). On the top of the first one write: ‘Things I cannot change’. At the top of the second write: ‘Things I can change on my own’. On the third write: ‘Things I can change with help / together’. Transcribe every single thing on your list into one of these three categories. Now take a long hard look at the first category – those things you cannot change or control – and ignore every single entry on that page. Stop wasting your energy on any of them. Now look at the other two pages: those things you can change on your own and those things you can change with help / together. These are your to-do lists. Crack on!

Lesson 38: Understand the impact you have on others.

The first of the five components of emotional intelligence is self-awareness and one of the most profound sub-components of this is understanding the impact you have on others. The impact of what you say, how you say it, when you say it. The impact of your non-verbal communication: how you look, how you behave, how you enter a room, your presence. What is the impact you have on others?

Lesson 39: Nurture your relationships.

The new Zeus would be the first to attest that you can’t achieve everything on your own. You can’t achieve your best on your own. We are a social species. We need other people. Our success, our contentment, depends upon the quality of relationship we nurture in life and at work. And relationships need constant attention. What relationships do you need to nurture the most?

Lesson 40: Be yourself.

Each of us possesses an in-built insincerity sensor. We find it very easy to tell when someone is trying to pretend to be someone they are not. So above all, the best leaders are not afraid to be themselves.

Take all the above lessons, lift the pearls of insight from *Transforming Olympus* that resonate with you the most, take the tools you like from the next chapter and make them your own. Don’t try to be Zeus or Hera or Athena or Helen or Dana. Actually, if you wish to be like any of the characters, be more like Dana. But be your own version. Authenticity in a leader is so important. As Oscar Wilde said: “Be yourself. Everyone else is taken.”

The tools from *Transforming Olympus*

Here is a list of the tools used by the Olympians and the Plutonians in the book.

Leadership:

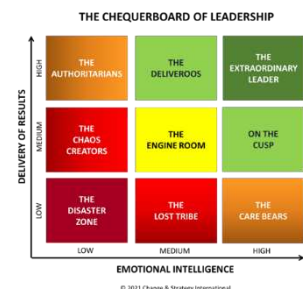
- The 12 Traits of Extraordinary Leaders
- The 5 Components of Emotional Intelligence
- The Chequerboard of Leadership
- The Change Curves

5 Components of Emotional Intelligence



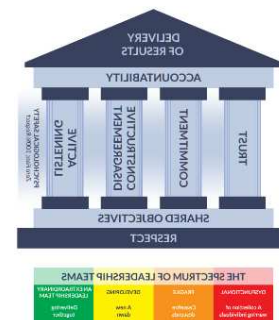
Leadership Teams:

- The 9 Components of Extraordinary Leadership Teams
- Organisation Design Framework
- The Game Changer Index
- The Spectrum of Leadership Teams



Programs:

- The 'Leading with Influence' Program
- The 'Leading Change' workshop
- The 'Extraordinary Leadership Teams' Program

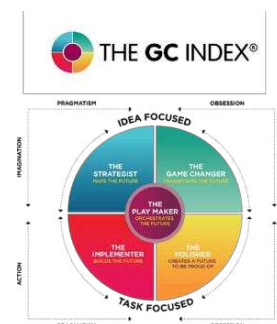


More information on each of the above available from www.changeandstrategy.com, plus ...

Assessments:

Conduct online assessments of you, your fellow leaders and your leadership team:

- Assess yourself against The 12 Traits of Extraordinary Leaders
- Assess your team against 9 Components of Extraordinary Leadership Teams
- Assess your Leadership EQ



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