Leadership with a happy face?

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happy Disney characters finding mild mannered Ferdinand in a green pasture just waiting for the Bull fighting arena, but it was a revelation. In a somewhat secretive report they realized that the British system is (1) as simple as possible, (2) adapted to the market, (3) easily and cheaply monitored, (4) with reasonable risks for both banks and government, and finally (5) with a significant and important target group of attention (small firms are generally known to be important both as sources of employment and sources of innovation). A similar government loan guarantee could easily guarantee some 800 million Swedish crowns for an annual cost (including administration) of 35 million Swedish crowns, and with a staff of no more than 10 people. For a comparison, Almi currently lend 100 million Swedish crowns to firms under 3 years of age. An extended loan guarantee would probably support quite a substantial amount of new jobs and every small firm with a reasonable business idea would be entitled to it.

So where is the catch? Clearly a format used in most OECD countries providing these benefits without significant costs would not present any difficulties in introducing? Well, try to kill off one of the main tasks of a governmental organization with 440 employees and you will find yourselves in some difficulties. This is the type of initiative that no one likes to suggest within the governmental apparatus. The civil servants making the investigation will in all probability be argued to have a grudge towards poor old Almi. In addition, there are a number of dearly found regional governmental jobs at stake. Any takers? We will see whether the inquiry sees the light of the day, or if it survives the avalanche of counter-arguments likely to be posted. All bets are off on this one.

So what about Northern Sweden and the paper and pulp industry? It turns out that as the paper mill refused to make any substantial R&D investments, a regional actor, supported by EU funds no less, found an intriguing way of at least partly solving the issue. With a small organization, these project managers bring together researchers and managers from the regional mining corporations, forestry equipment manufacturers and paper mills. They together decide how to find an acceptable solution and presents this to local entrepreneurs or SME’s that can act as producers of these services and products. Today this small collaboration presents roughly one business idea every month. The large firms avoid paying for R & D, entrepreneurs get business ideas for a pittance, the EU foots the bill and most importantly, the industry becomes comparatively more competitive on the international market. The moral apparently is that governmental intervention can have a benefit of its own, when grounded in the market and not in the idea of creating a superstructure apart from it.

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The Leadership Perspective
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Recently I received a magazine together with one of the business dailies. “That’s interesting!”, I said to myself, and read on it is always fascinating to get a take on what is moving in the leadership field. What struck me while reading the interviews with a large range of corporate managers, were all those happy faces. Of course the magazine was ad financed and promoted various companies as potential employers for students. You can’t display sad faces in such a context, but still, I was bothered by the questions that the happy faces raised: are smiles what leadership today is about and what are the consequences of thinking about managerial leadership as a happy enterprise?

The reality of leading and managing in companies and organizations that I have seen in my research and in training sessions with active managers, is that the daily life of management more often than not is both strenuous and filled with conflicting demands. This is not surprising, given that leadership is about exerting influence on setting goals and creating the means to reach these goals. Many times it is also about creating something new and those who lead such enterprises tend to confront challenges in terms of unexpected constraints.

I am not alone in these observations. Think about the studies that have been made of managerial work. The seminal study was by Sune Carlson, the first professor at the Department of Business Studies in Uppsala. His Executive Behavior is famous for the detailed description of the working days of executives. By looking at for example the duration of activities and the patterns of contacts, he was able to pinpoint some profoundly human aspects of executive life. He finds managers constantly hoping that “we shall soon return to normal times” when things will calm down a bit. He observes that managers more often than not get interrupted, thus seldom finding time for reflection.

Carlson’s studies have over the years been supplemented and developed by more research that has taken account of new ways of organizing and new technologies, but I think that Sune Carlson’s work still provides important lessons for today’s managers trying to keep a smile on their face. Here are two:

You are not alone in trying to cope with high work load and conflicting demands. This is the normal state of things for a manager, which speaks for taking an attitude of tolerance and forbearance. The happy harmonious moments are exceptions, so cherish them while they last and don’t be disappointed when they end.

The fact that unexpected developments interfere with your plans is a result of the complex web of activities and contacts that you are part of and the uncertainties that a dynamic business environment is made up of. You may do your best to be pro-active, but despite your best efforts you are still likely to be exposed to surprises. Thus, be kind to yourself and expect the unexpected.

But is it possible for highly motivated managers, who see opportunities to improve performance at every turn, to let go a bit, and smile in the face of the unexpected? I am not sure, but aligning expectations of performance to what can really be achieved, should reduce the risk of disappointment and that is likely to be a good starting point for a smile.

Finally, if you want to counter the somewhat bleak view of managerial leadership, I have a recommendation. Have a look at Passion and Discipline, a film made by one of the world’s most prominent organizational researchers, James G. March, where he explores leadership in connection to imagination, commitment, and joy. You can stream it from the website of the Stanford Graduate School. It is a film that surely puts a smile on my face – it’s also a lesson in how to keep that smile in the face of hardship.