

SEVEN Bytes

LEADERSHIP - A GAME OF CHESS OR AN ECOSYSTEM TO NOURISH

To its devotees, the game of chess is a microcosmic world where the battles of life are lost and won. Not surprisingly, it is often used as a metaphor for leadership, since it demands a broad strategic vision, the resilience to adapt to the unexpected, the tactical skills to use resources effectively, and with experience, a signature style that enables people to play to their strengths in pursuit of the goal.

A simple analogy I heard many years ago contrasted a 'draughts' (checkers) style of team leadership with a chess one: the draughts leader's view is that team members are pretty much the same as each other. Since people are more-or-less undifferentiated and interchangeable, there is no need to look for any special qualities or opportunities to excel. The chess leader, on the other hand, gets to know the individual strengths and limitations of each piece on the board. The strengths of one can compensate for the weakness of another, and the overall goal is achieved by thoughtful coordination and deployment of the whole team.

But the metaphor can only be stretched so far; real life isn't as ordered and regulated as a chess game. The U.S. general Stanley McChrystal tells how his training and temperament impelled him to tackle his military objectives as if he were playing chess:

"Empowered with an extraordinary ability to view the board, and possessing a set of units with unique capabilities, I was tempted to manoeuvre my forces like chess pieces...driving my relentlessly aggressive campaign toward checkmate... I felt intense pressure to fulfil the role of chess master for which I had spent a lifetime training"

But faced with the VUCA (volatile, unpredictable, complex, ambiguous) nature of events, he soon realised that the Chess Master, hierarchical, command-and-control model of leadership was no longer up to the task.

A better metaphor, he argues, is that of the gardener who has the vision and strategy to link the diverse elements, manages the ecosystem and ensures the supply of nutrients to enable the various components to flourish with 'smart autonomy'. In this conception, the organisation is a living organism with a shared consciousness maintained by these elements:

- Shift focus from moving pieces to shaping the ecosystem
- Create and maintain the teamwork conditions
- Keep the team of teams focused on clearly articulated priorities
- Nurture free-flowing conversation
- Reinforce empowered execution
- Lead by demonstration
- Keep eyes on, hands off style

