Doing Leadership:

In Collaboration With Echidna Scholar, *Urvashi Sahni*

For this article, we decide to informally interview fellow Alumni Scholar, Urvashi Sahni.

Urvashi is the CEO and the founding President of the Foundation, Studyhall Educational Foundation (SHEF).
The synopsis on Urvashi's leadership ethos can thus possibly be described as seeing leadership as a **Verb**.
It is not a descriptor of a title or position but rather an active, intentional activity......this article explores how, and gives some practical insight for 'doing' leadership.

• Studyhall school was the first unit within the foundation. Since then 7 other units have been developed. The other units are:
• Prerna Girls School - founded in 2003
• VIdyasthali, a rural school - founded in 2005
• Digital Studyhall with is an outreach unit - founded in 2005
• Prerna Boys school - founded in 2009
• Center For Learning, a school for children with special interests besides academics- founded in 2013
• Studyhall College - founded in 2016

Needless to say, Urvashi has had an exceptionally busy career and has established a large and multi-faceted foundation.
It was through our conversations around embedding a leadership ethos into organizational culture that we felt Urvashi's insights would be relatable to many of the Echidna Scholars and also valuable for scholars looking to internationally incorporate leadership development into their organizations.

Structurally, the (SHEF) leadership structure allows for each unit have their own leadership head and sub heads, who all form part of a united SHEF Leadership Forum and report to Urvashi.

Urvashi has also played a very hands-on role within the teams of each unit, and has intentionally worked hard to remain personally accessible to team members. This encapsulates one of Urvashi's foundational principles in her leadership philosophy, namely, the importance of establishing *Trusting Relationships*.

Let's dive in further to SHEF and how they '**Do**' leadership...

1. Build Trusting Relationships:
The importance of relationship as a cornerstone stems from Urvashi's own leadership philosophy. She comments,
My personal leadership style has evolved over the years. It was always a consultative style.
I never took decisions unilaterally, but always in consultation with the team.
I tended to micro manage everything for the first decade (we now 34 years old), but I learnt to stop doing that and to trust others as the team grew.
Now I do not micro manage at all. I trust my leadership forum and communicate with them continuously. I work very hard at mentoring and coaching them. I believe that you have to care for people as persons and not as employees. Its just the ethical way of relating with people - *respect them as persons first and last.*

The focus of relational leadership extends beyond internal SHEF relationships.
SHEF prides itself as being a stake holder responsive organisation:
Building a strong network of enabling supportive relationships, which they feel are very important for the growth and success.

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Psychologist Brene Brown (2018) writes on the *anatomy of trust*, as a foundational currency within organizational culture. It is something you cannot build successful teams or relationships without. Yet, Brown highlights, trust is not just one thing, rather, it's made up of parts, and if one of them is missing it can derail others abilities to trust you, and your capacity to trust others.

She breaks trust down into a helpful acronym - **BRAVING**

Boundaries: Are boundaries respected? Are they made clear?

Can you say no to uphold them?

Reliability: Are you consistent?

Do you follow through on what you say?

Do you know your own limits and not overpromise?

Accountability: Can you take responsibility for your mistakes?

Can you apologize and move forward without holding a grudge?

Vault: Can you keep confidentiality?

Integrity: Do you practice your values or just profess them?

Do you choose what is morally right rather than what is easiest or fastest?

Non-Judgment: Can others express thoughts to you without feeling judged by you?

Generosity: Do you assume the best in others, in their words, actions and intentions?

Take out: What is TRUST like in you team or organization?

As a Leader, do I meet all the BRAVING criteria?

Do I have others in my team who I struggle to trust because one or more of the BRAVING criteria are missing?

2. Leaders can be made:

An intentional leadership development thread runs through all units within SHEF.

SHEF believe that leaders are <u>made</u> and developed. Leaders require ongoing development regardless of their position and leaders require specific breakaway sessions to think about leadership.

SHEF adopts an emotional intelligence (EQ) approach to leadership development, which focuses on investing in their teams personal development and character not just skills / training. Because of this approach, there is the understanding and acceptance that developing leaders takes time!

Perhaps most noteworthy of SHEF's leadership approach, is that this form of continuous learning and development style of leadership is mirrored by Urvashi herself. If leadership from the top is not reflecting the values they profess, then it leads to leadership cynicism and mistrust.

Hence, Urvashi engages in her own reflective leadership work and she is seen attending and participating in leadership workshops herself.

Through 2 structured leadership approaches SHEF actively develop leaders:

Creating space for leaders to think: learning leadership does not just happen it needs to be actioned.

Space is made for formal leadership reflection through workshops and an annual retreat.

We go away for a 3 day retreat, which is an official leadership development workshop. I design and facilitate those, by first asking the team what their learning needs are and the issues they would like addressed. I build the workshop design around these.

I find relevant readings from a variety of sources, including the literature from the Echidna LDP.

We divide the team into groups of 4 and assign them a reading/s and ask them to lead the discussion around this reading. They are free to tackle the subject matter in any way that they choose. The groups meet several times to read and design their presentation.

These meetings are a learning experience for them.

I also include sharing of personal life stories, as much or as little as they feel comfortable.

There is meditation every day and quiet time for reflection written and oral each day.

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My team says they cherish and value these retreats and gain enormously from them. I do too. They are very enriching. It is also a very good bonding exercise for us as a team.

We do a follow up one day meeting after 2 months. And team leaders share their learnings with their own teams.

I lead a couple sessions, which are more philosophical and vision to communicate and further clarify our collective vision. These retreats have had an enormous impact. It has helped in the internalizing of our vision, mission and values which has strengthened the organization. It has ensured that our Vision has permeated into the DNA of the organization.

Mentorship & Leadership pipelines:
There is a formal mentorship program within the units of the foundation. This allows for leaders to be raised from within the organization rather than needing to bring in external leaders to fill positions. As a result, most of the current senior leaders within SHEF have been "foot soldiers" themselves, growing into their roles as leaders from the ground.

85% of my leadership Forum comes from the ranks of SHEF units and have been groomed into their leadership roles. A formal mentorship program allows for the development of a leadership 'pipeline/ successors'

I would advise fellow Alumni to get intentional about identifying and deliberately grooming a second line of leadership. It should form a large part of what they do. It is critical to the sustainability of their organizations.

I can't emphasize enough how critical the leadership retreats are in this respect. Even if the team is small. It is important to find the dedicated time and space to 'teach' leadership. The pedagogy used should be interactive, participatory and democratic.

Together the team members should construct the knowledge and skills they need to be good effective leaders.

Take out: What are you giving your team to read?

How are you educating them for leadership? How much time are you giving to developing your successor?

3. Know your Organizational DNA:
SHEF has worked hard to establish a core set of values and principles that are reflected in their vision and practices. They view leadership as vocational not occupational and this informs their mentorship program explained previously. Some of their core values include:

Create a learning culture:
In order to do this SHEF engage in experimental learning for individuals and continual self assessment as an organization.

As a learning organization, SHEF seek to ensure leaders and employees feel they have the freedom and autonomy to experiment, with ideas and apply new knowledge / skills without fear of failure or judgement. This makes them more effective, and innovative, because employees are not afraid of making mistakes, rather they see mistakes as opportunities to learn. At an organizational level, SHEF is a self-reflexive organization.

We continuously evaluate our methods, processes and programs, collecting data that we need and use it to improve our programs. Our evaluations are more internally driven and aligned with what we are evaluating.

Establishing belonging and collective identity:
One way to achieve this is being clear of and sharing your organizational mission continuously. The focus in this is to bring everyone into a mission mode as opposed to a 'job' mode. This detracts from individual accomplishment and moves towards a collective sense of identity and achievement.

Build a caring organization:
An Ethic of Care should be the bedrock of any socially driven organization, it should form part of the deep structure of values and organizing principles and apply equally to all the team members, beneficiaries and other stakeholders. This ethic of care should be guarded zealously especially while going to scale.

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Be Patient (especially when it comes to scaling):
We have learnt that social transformation takes time.
While the problems are large and the numbers are enormous, we have realized that we are dealing with complex problems that have been created by multiple factors over centuries. Solving them is not going to be quick or simple. So it is important to focus on the problem, to struggle and grapple with it in all its complexity, and to resist the temptation of being reductionist in order to scale.
The goal should be to deal with complexity and try and find ways and opportunities to scale without losing essential complexity.

Take out:
What is your organization's DNA?
What are the values that make up your team - do they know them?

4. Have your own Leadership Philosophy, and keep evolving it:

I've been influenced a lot by philosophers such as Krishnamurty, Dewey & Freire.
They have influenced my leadership style immensely. I have learnt to collaborate and consult because I know that I don't have all the answers and it's only through thinking together that the answers emerge.
My idea of leadership is to support, mentor and coach others. I trust that they will do their best and am willing to fill in the technical skills gap with coaching if they need it.
I believe that eventually we are all accountable to our teams and the work. So the accountability is a top down one not a bottom up one.
My model of leadership is to be relational, I meet with my leaders regularly and talk about the work, their lives and their mental and emotional health.
We meet once a month regularly as a group and in smaller groups or even one-on-one more regularly if needed. Then the unit leaders learn to do the same with their teams.

Does it work?
It works like a dream...and my stress level has gone down tremendously!

Less power also means less responsibility and less stress. Even though eventually it is my neck on the line, we take all decisions collectively, the responsibility is shared. I think this also ensures that better decisions are made, because of collective thinking and brain storming together. So all our policies, future plans and decisions are taken at group meetings.

In closing, we asked Urvashi what other Echidna leaders could be asking themselves if they wanting to intentionally improve the leadership skills within their organizations.

Here are her responses and a few of our take-away reflection questions:
1. What is your leadership philosophy? And how is it affecting the teams you lead?
2. How can I help my second order leader own the vision of the organization?
3. How can I help her/him believe in their own capabilities as leaders?
4. How can I help them be caring, learning, inspirational, empowering leaders - ones who their teams want to be led by?
5. What is your next step in ACTIVELY developing your leaders? eg. Do you need to start a mentorship program or begin conducing leadership workshops or plan a leadership retreat? Perhaps consider designing a leadership development program that includes readings and activities for specific leaders throughout the year or create a leadership forum?

References:
Brown, B. (2018). Dare To Lead. The seven elements of trust.
www.daretolead.brenebrown.com

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