

INTERVIEW WITH MARY LIPPITT, PH.D.

Professor: Doreen MacAulay, Ph.D.

Welcome, Doctor Lippitt.

Thank you so much. It's a pleasure to be here.

We appreciate your time. So first to start off, could you tell us what was the motivation behind writing your book, *Brilliant or Blunder*? What really motivated you to write this?

I think the biggest motivation was my desire to make sure that leaders are effective. I think that the cost of errors is so extreme these days in terms of whether it's a Lehman Brothers or an Enron, if a leader really makes a blunder it just doesn't impact his or her career, it impacts the whole organization. So I think there was a desire really to help people make the smart decisions and make sure they don't fall for the pitfalls that we have found are popping up a little bit more often than normal.

Normal. Absolutely. So how does this kind of looking at these mindsets differ from other leadership models that we have? Or what kind of set this apart?

I think that what our traditional leadership models basically are looking at the leader as a personal characteristics such as integrity or courage. And then we had a period of time where we just focused on leadership style and then their competency, whether they knew how to do the job. But you'll notice that all three of those are looking at the person as the leader, and it's really not considering the context. It's not looking at the reality that that leader is having to face and having to detect.

And in addition, the leadership models traditionally have been sort of static. We're in a very fast-changing world, very competitive world, and we really need to add a dynamic factor to leadership so that nimble decisions are made in a timely manner. So I think that makes the big difference. It's not just the personal. It is a context, a situational awareness.

So how does the model's framework address that?

Well, what happens is that we have a tendency to rely on our past experience and our habit. So we usually look at just one or two things, and that's what we check, and we tend to make gut reactions. And for routine decisions, the gut, the intuition really works well. But when we're dealing with new situations or when we're dealing with very system-impact conditions, we really have to look at things from a comprehensive viewpoint.

And that's where the six mindsets is sort of like asking you to do a panorama of all the things internal to the organization as well as external, and do that analysis before you make a decision. It's

trying to step back and make sure that we actually do the detection work, rather than just rushing to a solution.

So if you look at leadership from this kind of perspective, do you think that this kind of changes the leader's role in the organization when you have this kind of a more comprehensive approach?

Yes. Particularly because in the past the leader was supposed to be the all-knowledgeable person that if you had a question you go to the leader, you get the answer. It was sort of like a machine that you feed a question to and out pops an answer. And what's happening now is that a leader really cannot cope with all the complexities, and we need to have this kind of inclusion. And so actually the leader's role has changed from an answer-provider to a question-giver and making sure that those questions get answered.

So having the ability to ask the penetrating question is really where leadership has to go as we move forward into greater complexity, the international aspects, the quickness with which our competition landscape changes.

So now if we look at the history of the development of the concept of a leadership, this is really kind of making it a different, more agile form of work, if you will, for the leader. Is this something that everyon, do you think, can be able to do, or is it something that people could learn how to do? Or how do you feel about that?

I think people can learn how to do it very easily. This is not limited by IQ, and it's not limited by some people will think this is a style issue. It's not style. It is as practical as saying if somebody has plans this weekend and they all of a sudden inherit \$5 billion it may change their plans this weekend, but they want to take a look at all the options that they have available to them.

So I think that as soon as we learn I have to look at this issue, I have to look at this issue, and look at it from those six points, it becomes a checklist. And so it's not asking for a personality transplant. It's not asking for a major change in the way-- I think it's just saying, I just want to be aware that I'm collecting all the data that's relevant before I make the decision.

After I collect the data, I have to then weigh it accordingly, so still there's a judgment factor here, a sense of being smart about that analysis that again is different from the answer machine kind of rote habit response kind of--

Relationship.

Yeah.

Wonderful. So now if you're looking at the role of the leader, though, with the mindset, can that help them with influencing the individuals that they're working with? And how does that happen?

What's really interesting is that historically the idea is a leader comes up with a vision and that his or her role then after that is just to spout the vision completely, consistently, perpetually repeating this new goal that has been selected. What the mindsets do is it helps people understand that just one mindset is not going to convince the audience, and that what you have to do is understand what those different perspectives are so that people are hearing something and say, "Is this good in my view?"

And so one of the interesting things about the mindsets is that three of them basically are suggesting that we need to rapidly change, transformational, quick change, that we should take risk, and that we should be focusing more externally. And historically, those are the people that are the change agents. These are the people that push change, that come up with ideas, love change.

But then we look at the fact that change is only successful between 11% and 30% of the time. And you say. Why is that happening? It's because the people who like the change have to get the people who have to implement the change on board. And what they're listing for are is this going to be internally appropriate? Are we reducing the risk? Is this going to be manageable, evolutionary change?

And so when a leader understands those two different mindsets, he or she then can make sure that when they speak and they discuss and they listen to concerns that they are listening to a mindset and understanding how to address the concern from that mindset. So it helps that leader really reach the variety of mindsets in the audience.

So really trying to help enrich the understanding of the context that you have to pay attention to and to all the different voices that you're dealing with.

Correct. Stephen Covey said you seek first to understand, and then he understood. Well, so you're trying to understand the audience first, before you get into your routine. And I think what historically has happened is the people who like the fast change think that questions coming from the people we want to make sure things are well thought through, and they label them resistors. And then there's a separation that occurs and you don't have that sense of teamwork and that high level of commitment to make the change actually happen.

So instead of seeing it as a tension almost between those two, trying to see the value in both sides and being able to move forward. Absolutely.

And I do think that we have to basically win people over. We can't just demand that they will support something. We can get compliance by demands, but I actually worked for a group and they told me we're on the BT. I said, "What's the BT?" "We be here when it starts, we be here when it ends. We're just going to wait this one out. And I think that's part of the reason why change doesn't happen in organizations."

OK, wonderful. That's great. The other connection I want to kind of take a look at the you actually refer to in the book and I'd like for you to maybe explain in your own words a little bit is the connection with the mindsets and the actual organizational life cycle. We talked a little bit about how it's important to understand the audience and it helps the leader in that regard. But this is really also about understanding where your organization is as well. Can you speak about a little bit as well?

Yes, I think it's interesting that we have pretty common acceptance of the project life cycle and the product life cycle. But we haven't really understood the impact of the organizational life cycle on leadership. And what happens is different issues pop up and become more significant at different stages in the life cycle.

And if you take a look at the entrepreneur who's just starting a new business, their focus is a what can I offer the market? And then they have to shift their focus to looking at the customers. And then there's sometimes a resistance to moving on as the organization needs to be more professionally managed, have more structure, be more consistent, reduce the amount of chaos. And that shift is resisted because people say, I don't want to do that. This is my formula for success.

And I think that it is one of the reasons why we have a large number of entrepreneurs failing, because they don't understand the shift. And likewise, there's a very difficult period when you develop an organization. You have the infrastructure, you have the processes down pat, you've got the people in place, and you think everything is perfect. You have a wonderful track record behind you and then you say, why should I change? And someone says, do you want to be the BlackBerry? It had success, but it didn't adapt quickly.

So that is again how do I leave behind my success to grab onto a new opportunity? And in part that grabbing has to be not just thinking about the product, but it also has to be thinking about the business model and how my business model has to change in light of what's happening with technology, with the customers, with the marketplace, everything.

It's hard to let go of success, but you get-- I guess the traditional is you don't want to be a buggy whip manufacturer. You have to keep the organization going. And I think that one of the downsides of using the term "organizational life cycle" is that people feel that after you hit maturity that there's just termination. They assume the organizational life cycle has to have the same termination point as a human life cycle.

When in reality organizations can last hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years. Royal Dutch Shell is an example of a 300-year-old firm. I did some work in Japan. There was a 1,000-year-old firm there. And so we have to disconnect the life cycle from assuming after I reach maturity it's just termination. You can reposition yourself. You can't grow again.

So now just to understand your model, is that maybe the motivation behind the wheel as opposed to having it in a graph type of form, so that encouraging us to remember that this is a continual process?

Correct. And I would want to caution you, the wheel is frequently presented in the book where all six are equally given the same amount of space on the wheel. That is for the analysis. And that's when you're taking in the information. Eventually you're going to make a decision where one or two are becoming more significant.

And in our research we have 41% of the leaders focusing on one priority, but that leaves the other portion. But the point being that others still have to be monitored, because there can be something very significant happening. While I'm trying to accomplish one thing, if something else presents as an opportunity or presents as a major danger or risk, I have to take a look at it.

So the wheel in the book frequently is equal, but the point is that's for analysis. When we get to actually decision making, I have to choose one that's primary without putting blinders on myself to the others. It's a continual need to look at what's happening in the organization and outside the organization.

I don't want take too much more of your time, but I would like to know if there was one main takeaway for the students to have from this book, what would you want that to be?

I think so I would like them to accept the idea that you have to be nimble by continually looking at the context. Again, people count. And I'm going to say all those other approaches to leadership definitely add value. But we really need to have a more dynamic approach, and one that's based on the reality that surrounds us so that we can make the brilliant decisions and avoid the pitfalls.

Wonderful. Well, thank you very much for joining us, Doctor Lippitts. We really appreciate your time.