



Disruptive Leadership Riptides in 2011 - by Anders Sorman-Nilsson

When it comes to generation, innovation and communication trends in leadership, it is crucially important that you as a leader are able to do three things to stay compatible with a constantly shifting business landscape:

1. Spot
2. Feel
3. Position

I learned to initially spot, feel and position according to the forces of trends some years ago when I was doing research work for a foreign exchange trader. We used a sophisticated system of technical analysis to indicate when to jump into and out of certain trades. While technical analysis is somewhat devoid of human emotions and a more generalised approach to market psychology, trendspotting in leadership is heavily reliant on combining data, observation of consumer/talent psychology and intuition in order to make concrete decisions that affect how your organisation is run.

The trend is either your friend or foe.

Especially as we enter a new decade of thinking, and a new zeitgeist is informing talent behaviour, we need to all become trendspotters with a finger on the pulse. Because whether you're aware of it or not, the GFC changed leadership forever.

In the last 12 months I have consulted and spoken with business leaders in Japan, China, Taiwan, Sweden, Denmark, Malaysia, Spain, USA, Hong Kong, New Zealand and Australia, and what strikes me is a distinct lack of trendspotting fingerspitzengefühl, which is leaving leaders dumbfounded by the following 2011 disruptive leadership riptides:

- a. Communication Trend: Social Media Risk / Risqué
- b. Innovation Trend: Buy-In
- c. Generations Trend: Misfits

Even as a professional trendspotter, I sometimes get this idea of trends (or riptides depending on your perspective) completely wrong - with near-disastrous results. In February 2009, I was at a strategic retreat with 4 colleagues on the south coast of NSW, when we decided to take a morning coffee break and competitively run down for a refreshing swim.



Now, I am a good swimmer ... on Swedish lakes. In Australia, I have always figured that my swimming 1.0 (breaststroke) only had to be better than the slowest English backpacker's at Bondi Beach to avoid getting eaten by a shark, but on the south coast of NSW, there are plenty of unguarded beaches. Unfortunately for me, the beautifully located Culburra beach doesn't have any red flags to swim in between.

Even though I won't be recruited to Bondi Rescue anytime soon, I am a decent runner, and I actually beat the other 4 guys to get down to the water.

Here was my first mistake - I failed to stop and do that quintessential Aussie thing (that's a technical term) - to spot a riptide. No one at the Department of Immigration had questioned me on this when I sat my Australian citizenship test on Swedish National Day 2008. "Slip, slop, slap" is all well and good, but in the surf it doesn't help a lot. So I jumped straight into the water without noticing the frothy riptide that immediately enveloped me, and my overly testosterone-charged mates, who had also failed to take notice of the riptide. Mistake No. 1.

Unlike me, they're all very good swimmers (can do free-style 2.0 swimming... I think some of them even have gills) and as soon as they were able to feel the dynamics of the riptide, they decided to "gun it" back to shore. Meanwhile, I was being pummelled like a glove in a washing machine, taking in more water than air, and failing to master the water with my archaic breaststroke. I had failed to feel the dynamics of the riptide - mistake No. 2.

Next, unlike their Piscean yet un-aquatic friend, my mates were able to navigate the riptide by both swimming parallel to the beach and positioning themselves on the waves back to shore. With their superior timing and swimming skills they all made it back safely. At the same time, I am struggling to keep my head out of water, my right leg is cramping up, and I realise that I am in significant danger of actually both panicking and being seriously injured.

Now, men have reached an evolutionary stage where we can ask for directions, and some of us aren't afraid of admitting that we're out of our depths occasionally. I put up my hand as my head is bobbing in and out of the water for longer and longer periods of time. On the beach, my mates are realising that I am in serious danger, and as I am told later, that they are unable to muster the strength to go back out to save me. Panic.

Luckily, one my friends, Nils, is 75 meters away positioning himself to ride the riptide out while merrily bodysurfing to and fro the shore ... blissfully unaware of the ordeal his water-treading Swedish friend is in. Fortunately for me, Nils did notice my waving



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arms and yells between gulps of water, and eventually managed to drag me back in to shore.

To this day, I owe Nils my life, and of course a great metaphor for the kind of riptides and uncertainties we sometimes face both in leadership, life and business when we swim outside the flags of the known.

The GFC was a kind of riptide that no one knew how to navigate with certainty, and just like an unguarded beach, it was unknown territory, with little lifesupport available (unless you happened to be a big bank).

What Nils understood and had the capacity to do though was to spot, feel and position himself successfully and until my poor swimming skills interrupted his joyful bodysurfing expedition, Nils was a trendspotter extraordinaire, enjoying the waves of change around him.

It is the same in leadership, business and in life. You and your leaders need to learn how to:

1. spot
2. feel
3. position

themselves to ensure that your future leadership styles are compatible with disruptive communication, innovation and generations trends, on the post-GFC ripples of change in order to masterfully navigate the new decade's zeitgeist.

So what has happened since 2009?

Well, let's start with my swimming and then look at Social Media Risk / Risqué, Buy-In and Misfits.

As I am writing these lines, I am busily preparing myself to swim the 1.5km Dee Why Surf Swim in Sydney. I have been training in a disciplined fashion - both to improve my swimming 2.0 technique in the Bondi Icebergs' saltwater pool, and also my endurance and lung capacity by doing some coastal running, but it wasn't until I hit the real waves at Clovelly beach a couple of weeks back though, that I discovered what real ocean swimming is like.



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After my near-drowning accident in 2009, another near escape night-diving in the Red Sea, and a faulty attempt at completing the Coogee Ocean swim in 15.8 degrees in 2010, I figured it was finally time to learn a little bit about swimming and managing waves.

The beauty and horror of the ocean's swell, waves and tides is that you realise your own mortality.

It's a humbling experience to be rocked and bobbed around, while attempting to maintain some semblance of flow, breathing and technique, while observing the fish below you effortlessly navigating the ocean in a streamlined fashion. Aquatic life is so well adapted to the currents, flows and waves that it's impossible not to feel the calming effects of their environs.

As a more terrestrial trendspotter, who spends most of his time in other ecosystems, either in the air or around the globe, one thing strikes me as an important analogy from my short swimming career.

Don't fight the current!

This applies cross-contextually to business.

Yet many businesses today resist the current. Many find themselves swimming outside the flags in an economic riptide that relentlessly punishes the unprepared. It's not a 'Blue Ocean' strategy to be fighting for your life in a current that is dragging you away from the direction in which you want to swim. Rather, that is pig-headed lunacy.

Think of the number of industries that are now battling against a current of 'free' - the film industry, the music industry, the car industry, the mobile phone industry, the pharmaceutical industry. This is uncharted territory and literally, the old behemoths are struggling to keep their heads above the water.

This is why it's so important for leaders to spot trends, to feel the dynamics that are driving these currents, and to position your leadership in a way that opportunistically takes advantage of them.

So, let's turn our attention to the three leadership riptides that are pushing and pulling leaders in all directions in 2011.



Communication Trend - Social Media Risqué / Risque

Social media is a double-edged sword, and in 2011 more and more leaders will see the up-side and down-side of social media. In fact, social media is both risky and risqué, it's both dangerous and sexy. It's crucial to have a personal leadership brand social media presence, so that if and when a crisis happens, you can respond. Think of BP's, Nestle's and Tiger Woods' social media debacles. Brands can both be built and demolished in social media. Therefore it is incredibly important that brands focus on earning positive social media by engaging in a social fashion with their teams, fans and detractors. In a world of WikiLeaks transparency triumph/tyranny, you cannot only focus on media that you own such as your website, but you also need to 'earn' media such as a twitter following, facebook fans, and be active on industry forums (fora). With websites like bossrater.com, ebosswatch.com and glasdoor.com, your personal leadership brand is out there for all talent to blog about. Take a moment and google yourself today to see what I am talking about.

Innovation Trend - Buy-In

Innovation cannot happen unless leaders create a ground-swell movement of believers. You need to make your ideas sexy. In fact, I believe that ideas are like hippies. They want to flirt and engage in free love. They want to cross-fertilise, and see even more evolved offspring to drive business forward. If you have great ideas, you need to package them in a sexy and thought leading fashion, otherwise innovation efforts in your organisation won't go far. More and more, leaders need to pitch their ideas to risk-averse stakeholders, and being able to present your ideas so that you get Buy-In is essential. You need to utilise both the best of analogue and digital communications to wow your stakeholders, to inspire and inform them, and to ensure that your ideas look and feel buff. Only then can they be realised, monetised and realised. Innovators need to become marketers, to understand stakeholder and talent mindsets, and to pitch a tailored message to lead innovation efforts successfully.

Generation Trend - Misfits

Misfits change things, and your staff no longer want to conform to your norm. In fact, they want to turn up to work as unique individuals, or Misfits. This year one of the major Swiss investment banks implemented an attire and etiquette uniform code which is very much off trend, and consequently I am curious to see how their graduate numbers will look in the future. More on trend is Toyota's Rukus, which was specifically launched for Gen Y with the tag-line 'don't blend in'. Interestingly enough, the largest technology company in the world, Apple, has a mission statement of 'think



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different'. In fact evolutionary misfits are some of the strongest brands that there are - think of the Australian icon, the Platypus. Generation Y and Z demand to be treated uniquely and are more narcissistic than any previous generations, which means that for you as a leader to get the most out of them, you need to recognise their misfit status and upgrade your leadership capabilities. In fact, leaders are lucky that Generation Y isn't weirder than they are. Generation Y has grown up with the internet, but only since 1994. Generation Z, the first of whom are entering the workforce in 2011, have never known a world without the internet. Do you think this will affect how they relate face 2 face with their leaders in the workplace? You bet. Get used to having to work with people who don't conform to the norm, and instead tailoring your leadership message in a way that inspires the individual misfit inside your talent.

So you might wonder how I have been cross-fertilising these insights to my own struggles in the aquatic waves of change. You'll be pleased to know that in a highly Australian fashion, I stopped procrastinating on applying for my Australian passport, and managed to complete the famous Cole Classic at Manly in February 2011 - all within a few days of each other.

Not only did it feel like a personal victory, but the feeling of moving with the water, and allowing the natural forces to add to your own efforts was a re-assuring reminder not to fight the current. The trend is your friend.

In fact it was so friendly to me that I even beat my very athletic brother by 10 seconds, a result which prompted him to challenge me to the longer 1.5km race at Dee Why, and I believe cognizant leaders today who spot, feel and position themselves according to the natural forces and trends in 2011, will be able to pull out ahead of the competition in similar ways, and play an even bigger game in the new decade of thinking we're entering right now.

About the author

Anders Sorman-Nilsson is the founder and creative director of the international think tank - Thinque. His unique global perspectives have been helping audiences in the USA, Europe, Asia and Australia make sense of and harness disruptive trends in innovations, generations and communications. His misfit insights have recently been manifested in his book Thinque Funky: Upgrade Your Thinking and amplified by AFR Boss Magazine, Wired UK, and Monocle. Advising clients like Apple, Cisco, Fuji Xerox, MTV, Johnson & Johnson, Lilly, CPA Australia, Northern Territory Department of Education and Training, UTS Business School and Macquarie Bank on 'next practice', Anders' future thinking provides GPS directions for businesses and leaders seeking to navigate a constantly shifting business landscape, and successfully enter a new decade of thinking. His next book 'Misfits' is coming to an iPad and Kindle near you in 2011.