

## When it comes to leadership, can a leopard really change it's spots?

*Nic Tsangarakis - Kwela Blog, August 2008*

I recently read a fascinating New York Times article (Living and Learning, Changing and Winning, by George Vecsey – July 27, 2008) about Tom Coughlin the coach of the Giants who won the Superbowl in 2008. At 61 years of age, one would expect that this seasoned “leopard” could not really change his spots. Right? Well, not quite. According to the article, Coughlin used to come off as “grumpy and devoid of humour” and was alienating a core of the team with his “sputtering, red-faced rages”. But he reversed the behaviour. After the Giants had a very poor season in 2006, and a lot of fans thought that Coughlin had contributed to the slide, he began to make changes in his style that not only was noticed by all concerned, but that also significantly contributed to the Superbowl success.

We see the same with leaders in business – it’s one of the reasons we’re passionate about the work we do. We know that change is possible. Here are some of the things we’ve seen that work in bringing about and sustaining leadership behaviour change.

### Self-awareness

Successful leaders are feedback junkies. They’re constantly asking for feedback and suggestions on what they can do to become better. They understand that they will at times have a blind spot that can only be brought to their attention through direct and frank feedback. They embrace these conversations and respond to the suggestions that they believe will have a positive impact on their roles. Coughlin says that his wife played a major role in constructively criticizing him and encouraging him along the way.

### Mindfulness

Apparently Coughlin used mantra’s like “be smart about it” and “put a smile on your (meaning his own) face” to remind him of the changes he was seeking. We find that the more leaders visualize the behaviours they want to exhibit, the greater the odds that they will play out these behaviours in work situations. In high stress situations – for example, a conflict with a direct report - it’s highly likely that a leader will resort to her or his natural style. Keeping the desired behaviours – maybe its emotional control and patience – in the forefront enables the leader to action these more effectively.

### Accountability

Every Monday morning, Russel (my business partner) and I participate in a brief meeting with each other. I have six behaviours that I’m trying to improve. He asks me to what extent I was successful in displaying the behaviours in the preceding week. I tell him and then we reverse roles. We’ve seen many examples of leaders disclosing their developmental goals to their constituents and then asking these people to notice any changes (positive or not so positive) in their behaviour. Techniques like this help to focus the leader to hold him or her accountable to live up to their commitments.

It certainly isn’t easy, but changing leadership behaviour by using these, and others, go a long way to obtaining meaningful change.