



Are You a Humpty Dumpty Manager?

TRANSEARCH
EXECUTIVE SEARCH & LEADERSHIP CONSULTING

John O. Burdett



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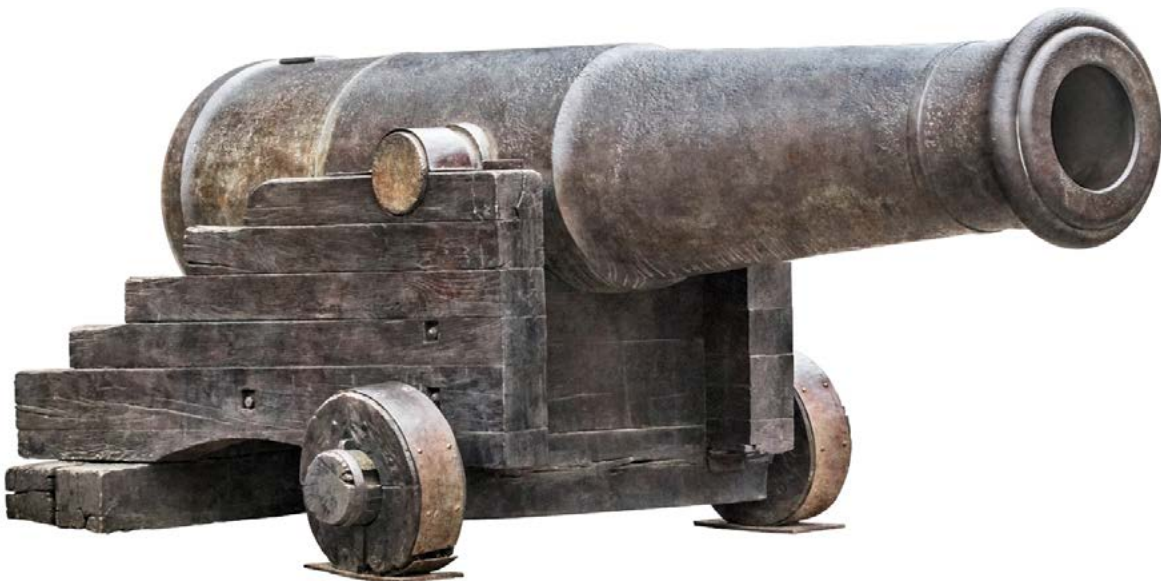
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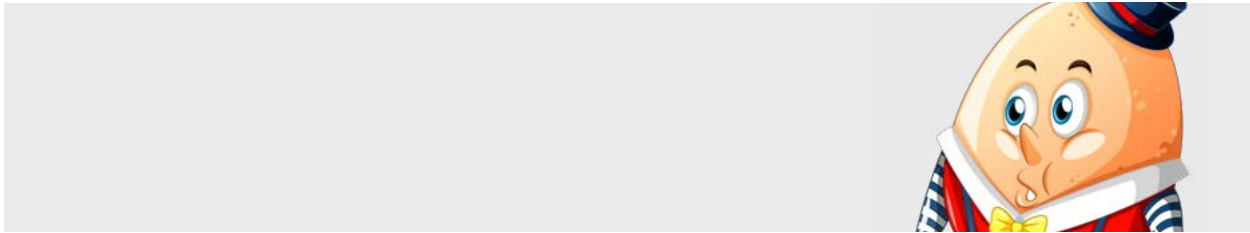
**“Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall/Humpty Dumpty had a great fall/
All the king’s horses and all the king’s men/Couldn’t put Humpty together again.”**

We all know the nursery rhyme above. Its origins, however, are more intriguing than at first might appear. One source suggests that “Humpty Dumpty” was the name Richard III’s political rivals gave him. With scoliosis (a curved spine) and, reputedly, a humpback – a derogatory name wouldn’t have needed much imagination. Richard’s army was defeated and he was killed at the Battle of Bosworth (1485). A titanic villain in Shakespeare’s Richard III (1592-1595), the play depicts his last panic-driven and unheeded words as, “A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse.” In a final indignity, in 2012, Richard’s body was discovered under a municipal car park in Leicester (UK),¹ former site of the Grey Friars Priory. And all the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put him together again!

It’s suggested that during the English Civil War (1642–1645), Humpty Dumpty was a cannon that sat proudly atop the walls of Colchester. Attacked by the parliamentary forces,



1 Bosworth Field is 15 kilometres from Leicester.



the city wall was breached and Humpty Dumpty was smashed to pieces as it hit the ground. A cannon in pieces is, of course, no longer a cannon.

A further iteration of the term goes back to the 18th century when Humpty Dumpty was a drink made by boiling brandy and ale. Strong stuff! The falling down part can be assumed.

The first recorded version of “*Humpty Dumpty*” as a nursery rhyme dates back to 1870 in James William Elliott’s *National Nursery Rhymes and Nursery Songs*. A year later, in *Through the Looking-Glass*, Lewis Carroll depicted Humpty Dumpty as an egg. An example of Lewis Carroll’s truly vivid imagination.

Running through the Humpty Dumpty narrative is a common theme: no matter how depicted, a fall is imminent. And not just any old tumble. In its earliest rendering, even a cry for help from the highest in the land was to no avail.

So, what does Humpty Dumpty have to do with management? We explore the world through metaphor and learn through story. In that it’s heading for a fall, our fallible and brittle egg, metaphorically, represents a multitude of those who wear the mantle of management. Managers² who are losing ground both practically and culturally. Individuals who can be recognised not so much for what they do ... but for what they fail to do. Leaders whose actions are dominated by what they see in the rear-view mirror. Consider and reflect on each of the statements that follow. How many (if any) describe you? To add objectivity, each statement is followed by additional clarification.

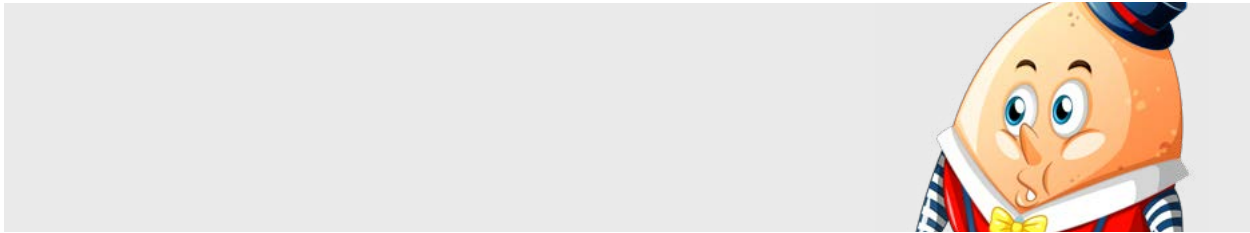
- 1. I don’t always recognise that what got me here won’t get me to where I need to be.

Clarification: Vibrant leadership is found in the following themes. Change starts by challenging the status quo. Innovation thrives in a culture where psychological safety is a reality. To take others where they might otherwise not go is to employ the head (direction), empower the hand (deliver), engage the heart (development), and enrich the spirit (day-to-day dialogue). Those who don’t live the organization’s values in everything they do belong in a different organization.

- 2. My inner-dialogue reinforces the self-belief that “I’ll change when I have to.”

Clarification: Talent is a gift; character is a choice. It’s easy to put off change. The dilemma? Such non-decisions always come back to haunt you, invariably, framed as “an emergency.” Change delayed is especially problematic because by then the opportunity will be lost.

² For “manager” read “leader.”



- 3. I view life-long learning as an attribute enjoyed only by those who, apparently, have time on their hands.

Clarification: If you don't grow the people in the organization, you can't grow the organization. The only truly sustainable competitive advantage is how quickly the organization learns. Exceptional leaders are, of necessity, exceptional role models. What courses are you taking? Who is your coach? What business books are you currently reading? In what way have you changed your leadership approach to accommodate a hybrid work environment?

- 4. I regularly tell myself that I don't have time to read.

Clarification: In a world marked by turbulence, disruption and "expect the unexpected," "readiness" is essential. And the first four letters in readiness? READ!





5. I spend little, if any, time to thoroughly evaluate my own currency in the job market.

Clarification: If you don't invest in the learning needed to stay current, fail now. It will save time later!

6. I perceive culture as an esoteric, hard-to-grasp concept, where measurement (today's culture and the future culture needed) is deemed too difficult to even consider.

Clarification: Power moves into a vacuum. If you are not managing your culture, someone else is. Organizations that measure and manage all of the elements of culture, over the long term, triple the total return to shareholders that other companies deliver.³ Organizations that fail to fully address culture become, all too easily, trapped by "cultural drift." In pursuing that mindset, the assumption is that if we continue to do what we currently do, we will, somehow, magically end up where we need to be. Good luck with that. Cultural drift is the trap that the record industry, Nokia, Blackberry, Kodak, General Electric and Blockbuster fell into. Even more seductive is to assume that because you are making money you are successful. All of the businesses listed were making money. That is ... until they weren't.

7. I recognise that AI is something that I will eventually have to adapt to. That said, I don't have either the motivation or the opportunity to get ahead of the AI curve right now.

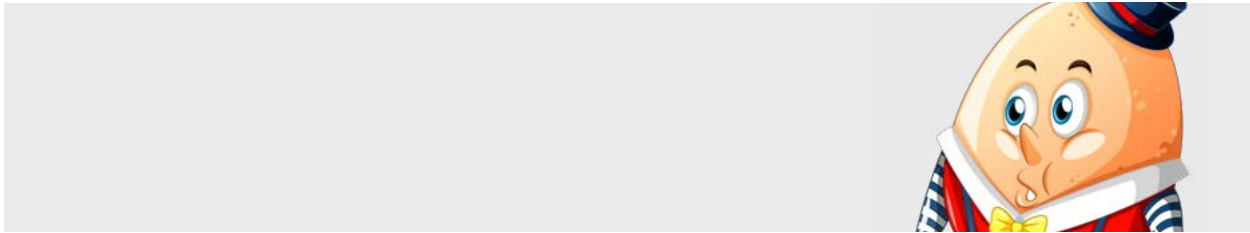
Clarification: If it can be digitalised, it will be digitalised. McKinsey suggests that Generative AI will add three trillion dollars of value to the world economy. Millions of jobs will be replaced.⁴ Many million more jobs will be changed beyond recognition. Fail to prepare and prepare to fail.

8. I don't fully recognise that – although emerging technology presents an opportunity to change the game – the 20th century organization, by way of design, is an inadequate and badly flawed vehicle.

Clarification: In rewiring the organization to take advantage of new technology – Flat, Fast, Focused, Flexible and Fertile to new ideas become essential design characteristics.

³ Carolyn Dewar, Martin Hirt, and Scott Keller. "The mindsets and practices of excellent CEOs" (October 2019).

⁴ Practical Quantum Computers are on the horizon. In 2019, Google announced that they had achieved quantum supremacy, when their Sycamore quantum computer was able to solve a problem in 200 seconds that would have taken the most powerful supercomputer in the world 10,000 years to solve.



- 9. My management skills were developed in a world where the enterprise held all the cards. Skills and capabilities that, as power moves from the enterprise to the employee, are either redundant or need to be revisited.

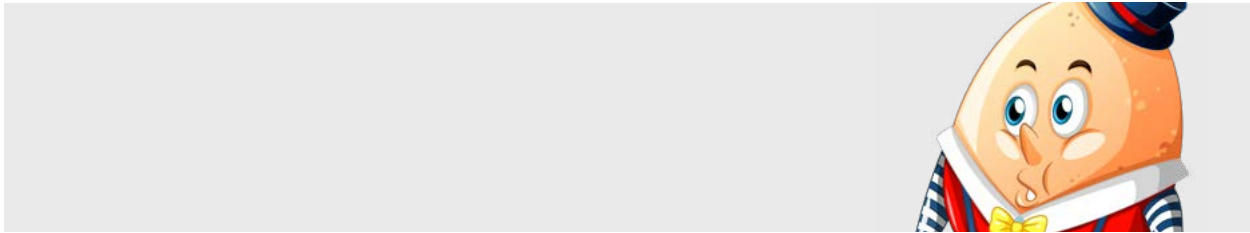
Clarification: If you can't coach, you can't lead! In a similar vein, faced with a new generation entering the workplace, when did you last upgrade your interview skills? How comfortable do you feel about managing/building a multigenerational team? Have you fully explored personal bias?

- 10. I do not have an outstanding successor.

Clarification: Traditional notions of linear career development no longer reflect today's turbulent reality.⁵ The way forward? The need to develop, in succession candidates, a quality best described as "learning agility." Meanwhile, a manager who holds down a mission critical role, who is within hailing distance of retirement and who hasn't developed a successor is a strategic and cultural liability.



⁵ Who, no matter what profession they are in, can deny that ongoing disruption, AI, ChatGPT, remote employment and the emerging generation of computing is both reinventing the workplace and making the term "career" dangerously misleading?"



11. I don't know – really know – why my best people stay.

Clarification: Thinking that you know is not the same as actually knowing! Knowing – really knowing – means digging deep; a challenge that goes far beyond a simple conversation that opens with “why do you choose to stay with us?”

12. I have tended to underestimate the deep-rooted, strategic challenge that attraction and retention represents.

Clarification: Are you investing in the key factors that drive retention: a compelling purpose; building a sense of belonging; alignment between capability and opportunity; organizational values⁶ that, regardless of level, people buy into; being part of a great team; a team leader who cares; choice around work from home opportunities; personal growth; lack of bias and fairness in hiring, promotion and job assignments; a focus on the environment; etc? As for attraction, what keeps the best ... attracts the rest!

13. My team is wedded to a traditional linear strategy.

Clarification: Only those who can see what others cannot see can do what others cannot do. When uncertainty rules the day, scenario planning becomes a leadership imperative.

14. I tend to focus on the team that I have rather than the team I need to create.

Clarification: One: Who you hire dictates what's possible. Two: The organization of tomorrow will be a team of teams. Three: The team leader works for the team and not the other way round. Four: If you are not regularly measuring team effectiveness – how team members work together – you are not really leading the team. Five: **TRUST** is best understood as **The capacity to build rapport, Respect, Understanding the needs of others, Shared values, The promise delivered.**

15. I don't plan for and/or take time out for reflection.

Clarification: Without reflection there is no learning! Without ongoing learning, you will be facing perilous and unpredictable seas without a map, no compass and little by way of navigational savvy.

⁶ About a third of organizations don't have values. About a third have values that aren't really values but merely good business practices. Albeit that they don't always connect with every demographic group, the final third do have values.



Reflection: Are You a Humpty Dumpty Manager?

Go back and put a checkmark against the statements that, more or less, describe you. Simply put – assuming that you operate in a substantial, fast moving and complex operation and it's within your scope of influence⁷ – if you recognise your own behaviour even in a third (five) of the above statements, your future is uncertain. It might not be next week or even next year, but if you fail to equip yourself for the world we are entering, know that you **will** stumble. Know also, in that today is the fastest things have ever been but the slowest they will ever be, you almost certainly won't be afforded the time to put the broken pieces back together again.



⁷ Even if you work for a small operation and/or the behaviours identified lie outside your scope of influence, the actions outlined provide a meaningful leadership development platform.



John O. Burdett

*“If you are
not managing
your culture,
someone else is.”*

- J. O. Burdett

JOHN O. BURDETT has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He continues to work on leadership development and organization culture for some of the world’s largest corporations.

In 2019, his work with ABB’s top 240 executives received a major international award for the most innovative leadership development initiative of that year. His ongoing partnership with TRANSEARCH International means that his proprietary work on talent acquisition, in any one year, successfully supports many hundreds of top leadership appointments on six continents.

He has written extensively on executive coaching and was awarded international coach of the year by the Finnish Institute of International Trade. Business graduates at the University of Texas indicated that his material on coaching was the single most valuable learning source they took away from their undergraduate degree. He has also coached

numerous executive teams around the world in how to coach. He currently coaches a select group of CEOs.

Apart from a range of corporate leadership workshops, he has taught at business schools on both sides of the Atlantic. His work on the MBA program at the University of Toronto received a teaching excellence award. John holds a doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

In addition to numerous business articles and twice being awarded article of the year by MCB publications, he has published 16 books on leadership, talent management, coaching and organization culture. A number of them bestsellers. His Leadership Beyond Crisis Series came out in 2021. In 2022, in addition to a number of leading-edge articles, he brought out a fully revised version of his international bestselling book on executive integration: *Without Breaking Stride*.

