



You might be doing it right, but are you doing what matters?

Stephen Harrison talks with Peter Stevens, inventor of the Personal Agility System™, on its essence and how it flows into servant leadership

The Personal Agility System™

Stephen Harrison – Peter, as the inventor of the Personal Agility System™ (PAS), can you describe its essence.

Peter Stevens – It helps people to “do what matters” and that leads to more fulfilment. Unlike other frameworks that give you steps to follow, Personal Agility is based on powerful coaching questions. You can use it to help yourself or people around you figure out what really matters and take the right actions.

Is the PAS for somebody's personal life, or for work?

Both. My first discovery of applying it to my personal life is that coaching yourself is much easier when you have someone to help. I needed an external challenge for the system to be effective, and when I realised this need, I asked my wife for help, which willingly came. Interestingly, from the early adopters of the PAS the most common feedback up to now has been the positive impact that it has had on their personal lives. When my wife and I started doing this together, it meant that we were suddenly able to get things done that had been sitting on the back burner for ages! We aligned better, or simply it felt like we were a team.

So, when you tried personal agility all by yourself, you noticed it was not working and got some external help. After that step, was it plain sailing?

I noticed it was hard to stop what I was doing, and then really reflect on whether I was focusing

on my priorities or even if I had set the right priorities. Now I find this a very beneficial process. It helps to avoid the procrastination of putting off things that are not so much “fun” to do. It helps us keep a balance between the nice to do and the must do. The issues come when we are not able to find time together in our busy schedules to sit down for our weekly “celebrate and choose” meeting. And, when it does not happen we miss it and see the consequences clearly... for example when we both go to grab the car keys on the same day, or the peer to peer alignment and ownership is missing and one of us resorts to “nagging” as a strategy to get things done.

Since you started cascading PAS through your training work, what feedback has made you feel most proud?

One of the early adopters used Personal Agility for 6 months without even telling me. One day, he sent me a three word e-mail that made me punch my fist in the air with a loud “Yes”... he wrote... “This really works”. I have heard stories about how it has led people to live happier lives, get more benefits from what they are doing with their time and improve the effectiveness of manager/subordinate relationships in the workplace. What really fills me with optimism is the realisation that the system that works for me also works for others. And, that the early adopters are now passionate advocates themselves.

Servant Leadership

Peter, do you see a link between PAS and servant leadership?

Well, let's break that down a bit. First, what do I understand by the term “servant leadership”? For me “leadership” is the ability to inspire others to do more of what you want them to do. And servant leadership means that the leadership is done with the full understanding that

value is created by the followers, not the leaders and therefore that enabling the followers is the key role of the leader. It's about creating the conditions for great things to be done, not commanding / telling others to get things done. A servant leader might provide hints, direction, a vision, inspiration to make the activities possible and make it possible for others to follow. They might also embody a role model that others will emulate.

In PAS the follower asks questions of the leader, striving to understand what really matters, then takes responsibility to take action to support what really matters. The leader and the follower are aligned, because the leader knows the follower agrees with what really matters and the follower can make the right decisions in their context.

From history, film, myth or other well known media, can you talk about a servant leader that others might be able to identify with.

Yes. And, let me start by talking about the opposite of servant leadership... “power”. I define power as: “the ability to make somebody else's life miserable”. Perhaps it comes with a uniform, such as soldiers, police men etc. When I was working in India, I heard another take on the idea of power. Influence... which was described as “the ability to make somebody else's life better”. Let's bring that together. In the early to mid 1900's Gandhi had influence and the British had power. They had the guns and the uniforms. Gandhi unleashed the intrinsic motivation of the Indian people through influence. What happened? Well, as they say, “the rest is history”.

From politics, I might turn to John F Kennedy, the great visionary. I once heard a story that when he met a cleaner scrubbing the floors of the space centre toilets, the president asked the man: “Hey, what are you doing down there?”. “Well sir, I'm helping America get to the moon”

came the answer. The vision was clear and everybody had bought into it and felt inspired to work towards it.

From the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King achieved great things. He never commanded but he did inspire others to sustained action. And from today's business world Elon Musk is perhaps the best known example. He shares his vision for humanity, that we may survive beyond the ecological situation that we have gotten ourselves into. Our future should look more like Star Trek. It appeals to the most basic intrinsic human motivation.

Are there any functions in an organisation, eg HR, or finance, sales, development where you think that servant leadership fits better, or worse?

As a trainer, I spend my time with knowledge workers. But I am a self-employed business man and for a couple years, I had my own training room, which meant I had cleaners who came to take care of the room. Notice, I didn't say "clean the room", because, well who besides your Mom cares about that? I explained to them the importance of their work to the customer experience. Customers care a lot, and I care that my customers are delighted. So I made sure the cleaning staff understood the relationship between their work and the goals of my business.

They always did great work, and on the rare occasions when they didn't we could have an adult conversation about what needed to be done. So, yes, I believe the principles can be applied at many levels and in many functions.

Peter, you are a humanist at heart, it seems. Right?

Oh, I had not really seen things in that way. What do you mean with "humanist" Steve?

Well, you talked in the first question about how the PAS had added fulfilment to people. Then you mentioned in later answers that it has enriched interpersonal relationships and had a positive impact on people's lives. You refer to the power of influence being greater than the power of power its self, and now you talk about treating people in all walks of life with respect and dignity. That seems to be a very humanist approach.

Er, OK. Then yes. I'm happy to wear the badge of "humanist".

Peter, thanks for the inspiration. Let's talk next time on clans, tribes and the role of management and leadership in an agile organisation.

It will be my pleasure, thanks Steve.