DO PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP AND CONTROL LEAD TO WIDESPREAD MYOPIA?

Have you ever discussed the nature of reality? Growing up in the 1970s convinced me that all older people were ‘on some other planet, man’, so I was mostly open to the idea that there is more than one ‘reality’ available to human perception. Experience has since solidified an understanding that supports my perception that ‘reality’ can be whatever you (or we as a group), want it to be. And another thing: when someone (or another group) sees a different ‘reality’ to me, it is no easy challenge to get each other to see the other’s point of view.

LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS

Kouzes and Posner (2007) sought to understand what people perceived as the most admired leadership characteristics of their (idealised) view of a perfect leader. Their research was carried out over decades and on many continents, involving thousands of people spanning a variety of cultures and socio-economic levels. In short, they took the 20 admired leadership descriptors and asked subjects to rank them. The results of this very solid international research inspired me and colleagues to design a similar research survey to ask what Australian pharmacists thought about leadership. We used the same 20 validated leadership descriptors provided by Kouzes and Posner and asked 100 late-degree pharmacy students and 100 pharmacists with five or more years work experience to rank them.

PHARMACY’S SURPRISE RESULTS

There was little difference between students and the pharmacists. The top ranked seven characteristics from 200 pharmacy people is compared with the top seven from the Kouzes and Posner research in Table One.

Not surprising, the universal value of ‘honesty’ is at the top of the pharmacy list, matching the most admired leadership characteristic by people internationally. But the number two characteristic from the international research—‘forward thinking’—does not appear in pharmacy’s top seven. Our sample admires ‘competent’ as number two. That is both reassuring and not surprising. But what does it mean that ‘forward thinking’ wasn’t rated?

WHO’S IN CONTROL?

Other research seems to support this possibility from another direction. A paper recently published in the International Journal of Pharmaceutical Healthcare and Marketing demonstrated research that, among other things, surveyed Australian community pharmacists on potential entrants (supermarkets and the like) into the Australian community pharmacy industry. The result placed ‘government regulation’ at the top. No disagreement there. But the follow-up question asked the pharmacists where they thought the ‘locus of control’ for this barrier lay, ‘internal’ (within the profession), or ‘external’. Astoundingly for the authors (and me), the surveyed subjects strongly placed the locus of control over government regulation as ‘internal’ (within the profession). As quoted by the authors of the research: ‘There appears to have developed an assumption that the industry can dictate government policy indefinitely, which is, from the incumbent’s perspective, dangerous in the extreme.”

For 20 years the Guild has extracted five highly successful agreements with the Federal Government. But is pharmacy telling us it thinks this is the new normal forever? If so, is this a ‘reasonable reality’ to behold?

In my January column, I described another, albeit anecdotal, example of what I perceive to be evidence of narrow world view, inflexibility, over-adherence to old ideas and a popular desire to get things back to how they ‘used to be’. My descriptions above do nothing to dispel my fears that our profession is suffering from a potentially fatal sightlessness with its current perception of the world.

To my profession and to its leaders I coin a cliché from a different context: Stop it or we will all go blind! ■