

Post-recessionary leadership

Anton Franckeiss focuses on some of the themes for successful leadership to have emerged from the recession

As we emerge stumbling from the wreckage of organisational life in 2008-09, leadership, with all its facets and complexities, is being constantly examined and re-defined. With the challenging organisational changes that today's leaders face,

the concept of leadership is critical to organisational success and health. The scrutiny focused on leadership concepts and themes is therefore invaluable to discovering and promoting the right leadership.

As this scrutinising process evolves, some important themes have emerged from this quest to

understand the sometimes obvious, but often elusive, idea of leadership:

Everyone is a leader

Although organisations insist on trying to hunt down the Holy Grail of Leadership, studies have shown that there are many kinds of leaders arising from all levels of the organisation. The strange persistence of an outdated model is perhaps a reflection of seeing 'leadership' as a job title, rather than a descriptive term for a set of attributes. At ASK, our definition of leadership is "a relationship in which a person accepts responsibility for their own fate and for that of others in relation to achievement of the task" – a complex set of behaviours, not a formal position.

Once this psychological hurdle is overcome, it becomes possible to see leadership as something that we can all contribute, regardless of having 'authority' to do so. Leadership becomes what we do, not something that we put – or aren't allowed to put – on our business cards. As Rosabeth Moss Kanter has pointed out, "companies used to be able to function with autocratic bosses. We don't live in that world any more".

She makes a similar point about how notions of leadership evolve in an article about Martin Luther King: "To King, a true leader is not a searcher for consensus but a moulder of consensus. The civil rights movement, like all social





movements, was a jumble of many independent organizations with their own leaders and ambitions. King and his colleagues in his organization were not in charge, but they managed to get many separate groups moving together.”

The lesson is that the measure of leadership is not the status of the job title or the prestige of the role, but what is achieved. Leadership is about outcomes: pioneering approaches and good ideas – effective leadership – can come from anywhere, but organisations need to allow them to happen.

Bringing out the best in everyone

In the past, leaders have used non-empowering techniques to get results from their people. This has to stop! Just as ‘command and control’ doesn’t function at an economic level – as events of the late 1980s in eastern Europe taught us – so it fails at a human level, and especially in terms of the psychological contract.

As we take these hesitant first steps out of recession, there will be many people who – having batted down the hatches and stuck with an unrewarding or dissatisfying role – will look to

move on to more promising positions elsewhere. Indeed, in February, the Chartered Institute of Management found an increase in managers resigning from their posts even before this point was reached, commenting that “questions must be asked about employee engagement levels up and down the country”.

We can only tell ourselves that ‘we are lucky to have a job’ as long as our options are limited by circumstance, and most of us will hear those words less kindly when they come from someone ostensibly responsible for our development as well as our working day. The disengaged – even those who have not ‘jumped ship’ – are rarely disposed to spontaneously re-engage themselves. Engagement is a responsibility – a duty – of leadership: while it seems flippant to point out that leadership without followers is a long, lonely walk, it *is* a responsibility of leaders to inspire and motivate.

Those in leadership positions – as opposed to those displaying leadership behaviour – need to recognise the importance of the ‘push and pull’ factors in retaining and developing talent, as well as in

recruiting new talent for the future. The best leaders recognise the importance of human capital, and of investing in it not just money, but time and energy too to allow it to fulfil its potential and ambitions.

To retain and recruit, leaders must first engage, and engage with rather than ‘engaging’ at. Deployment of a strong employee value proposition may be a matter of ‘speaking’, but its development requires the complementary skill of listening if the most effective and authentic ‘pull’ factors are to be correctly identified. The most effective, developing and engaging delegation is not of task, but of authority and ‘voice’ – to bring out the best in people, it is not just responsibility we must give them but opportunity, encouragement and support.

Leadership versus management

In today’s world of constant change and complexity, organisations are looking for leaders who cannot only cope with, and accommodate, a wide range of variables but flourish within them. While there is undoubtedly a danger that ‘leadership’ is now said or written when ‘management’ is what is



meant – or needed – the difference is important.

As Peter Drucker famously said, “one does not ‘manage’ people. The task is to lead people... and the goal is to make productive the specific strengths and knowledge of each individual”. While tasks and processes still need to be managed and there should be no excuse for seeking to lead when management is what is required, the arena in which the choice between leadership and management is made is a matter not so much of ‘when’ as ‘where’.

The ideal is, of course, to seek the correct balance between both, so that organisations work both efficiently (doing things right) and effectively (doing the right things): there is little to be gained by being efficiently misguided.

Sensitivity in leadership

Because of the global and cultural demands of the business world today, leaders must be intuitive and sensitive in their actions, behaviours and relationships. Even within a single organisation within a single country, workplace cultures will vary from location to location and function to function.

In a world within which many organisations operate across multiple geographical boundaries, an intuitive sensitivity to local customs, protocols and etiquettes, and an awareness of – and sensitivity to – their personal impact have become crucially important attributes of leaders.

Competence in understanding the complexities of culture – not just the diversity of cultures across the globe, but the diversity that exists within even co-located teams – is an emerging and important leadership skill. This goes beyond a mere appreciation of diversity: the emerging leader must value cultural differences and know how to operate skilfully and tactfully in a variety of cultural contexts. Furthermore, they must have the relationship skills and emotional intelligence to communicate and interpret the organisation’s culture and values so that they can be enacted and embedded meaningfully in the local culture.

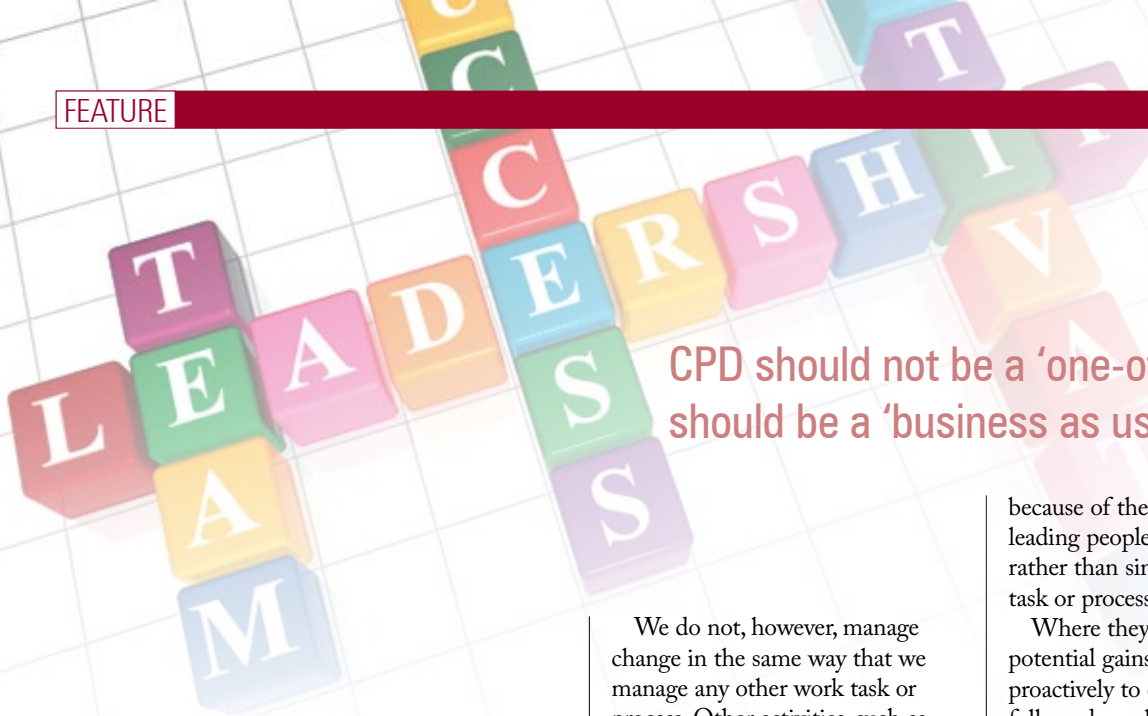
In the same way that ‘command and control’ is no longer relevant or appropriate, approaches closer in spirit to ‘invasion’ or ‘occupation’ need to be replaced with those closer to ‘integration’.

The holistic leader

The image of the ‘totally together’ leader increasingly needs to be replaced with one of the ‘life-long learner’. The concept of the implacably correct and unchallengeable leader is perhaps reassuring for those that want simply to be led but, in reality, it was always an impossibility. In a world where automatic deference is far less likely to be shown, the old image has become untenable.

And there are great benefits to be had – for both leaders and their organisations – in embracing the ‘life-long learner’ as a new paradigm. Viewed in the light of a definition of leadership as a responsibility and a relationship, not a formal position, how can it be anything but an endless opportunity to embrace new learning?

We now accept complexity, diversity and on-going change as unavoidable, inherent parts of the world in which we live and operate and, accordingly, leaders – like anyone else – must constantly seek to adapt and to develop their understanding of, and response to, changing circumstances and situations. In work, as in life, to



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grow and develop and to overcome the challenges that inevitably arise, we must continue to learn.

A recent study undertaken by The Work Foundation highlighted an interesting shared attribute that distinguishes outstanding leaders from the merely good: they actively search for opportunities to acquire feedback on their own performance and personal impact, so that they can continuously seek to make improvements.

Continuing professional development is often seen as something that we include in our annual development plan and attempt to ring-fence in our diaries in order to undertake various activities. The preferred approach, if we can redefine this now familiar phrase, should be to see CPD as something that is done every day and at every opportunity as a simple matter of course. CPD should not be a 'one-off' project: it should be a 'business as usual' activity.

Leaders as change masters

The ability to embrace change with a sense of excitement and challenge is the one defining characteristic that today's leaders must have. It's a cliché to talk of 'perfect storms' but the combination of globalised business, technology, demographic change and the role of innovation in maintaining or building competitive advantage surely qualifies. Change – and organisational initiatives that are launched and implemented either in response to it or undertaken pro-actively to 'keep ahead of the wave' – is a constant.

We do not, however, manage change in the same way that we manage any other work task or process. Other activities, such as product development, marketing, HR and IT, usually operate on a raft of plans, processes, Gantt charts and the like. But change, if it's not a tautology to say so, is different.

There are few approaches that provide organisations with a robust, integrated and pragmatic approach to the dynamics of the change process. Available models tend to be either too simplistic or too academic and therefore of limited use to the organisation – or leader – that wishes to address a changing corporate context. Many are linear in format and pre-suppose that a pre-defined 'desired future state' can be achieved through a stepped series of interventions.

Yet, to manage change, we must accept that it is multi-faceted and dynamic. This requires a flexible and responsive means of managing change – a process through which the desired future can be defined and achieved but that also leaves sufficient leeway to respond to changes of circumstances that will inevitably arise, and to unforeseen consequences that may emerge.

While organisations experience a process of change management, the people within them experience a process of transition. Each individual's transition journey can be straightforward or difficult: the scale of the obstacles they face along the way – and the ease with which they surmount them – is largely dependent on their leader's ability to guide them.

The ability to embrace the challenges of change enthusiastically is vital for leaders

because of their critical role in leading people through change rather than simply managing the task or process of change.

Where they emphasise the potential gains and benefits, work proactively to ensure people are fully and regularly informed, and share their own concerns and feelings while maintaining a positive focus on achieving the objectives, their behaviours and actions will make a significant, positive impact. Groups and individuals will need to learn not just new tasks and processes, but new behaviours: consequently, they will need to be supported, encouraged and inspired.

In work, as in life, the *status quo* is not an option: organisations, their markets and the way that we work are going to evolve and change as surely as the world is going to continue spinning. While there are eternal verities under the surface layers of passing trends and fashions, 'traditional management methods' can ultimately only become outdated. Leaders must show the ability to think, and operate, 'outside the box', in as much as any box can be designed only with the mindset of its era.

If we must re-invent our organisations, processes and procedures – and we must – any desire to 'command and control' them in a time-honoured fashion can only be perverse.

The 'ideal leader' will perhaps always prove elusive but, even if the quest for this Holy Grail might ultimately be in vain, we won't find the answers by looking over our shoulders. ■

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