

COMETH THE HOUR, COMETH THE LEADER

BY STEVE BERNARD



I have long been fascinated by leadership. When in industry I knew what I liked in a manager working for others, and learnt what didn't work too. Questions like "why is leadership so coveted and prized above so much else?" occupy a big part of my curiosity. I've always advocated standing back and looking at the complete picture before jumping to conclusions, so perhaps a less frequent question is, "what happens to leaders when the context they work within suddenly changes?"

Working at the vanguard of leadership studies in the 60s, John Adair developed the popular Action Centred Leadership model. In it he emphasises the importance of the *context* we operate in. It's obvious really but one objective of leadership is supporting change - or at least thriving in a changing environment.

The irony is that leaders can often get trapped in a new organisational context where their strengths and attributes are either less adapted or, at worst, ineffective.

Royal Mail

Moya Greene arrived from Canada in 2010 to take the helm at our national jewel – The Royal Mail. Here I argue for near perfect adaptation: law background, public service background and some exceptional experience to bring to bear from Bombardier and importantly Canada Post. Give that Head Hunter a cigar! Importantly she had an amazingly powerful naivety that she brought to the business context at the time. This powerful woman could quite naturally walk in to the Minister's office or in discussions with the regulator say, "*but why can't it be done? If you look elsewhere it's the norm.*" In just a few short years she has changed the regulatory framework, stabilised a business in an unprecedented period of competitive change and achieved a successful privatisation of the UK's largest public body, bar the NHS. Pretty impressive stuff in a restructuring context. When the right attitude and approach is tempered with the right skills and background, it can be magical. Is this the right leader for the post privatisation era? Who knows? What is evident is that the new context will require a very different set of skills and abilities as the focus turns towards building performance through its customers, its people and internal culture change.

UKIP

Nigel Farage has indeed created a revolution in British Politics. For the first time in a generation or two they have created a *real choice* that is new. Born out of the EU era, it is a force that cannot be ignored. He brings amazing vigour, energy and rhetoric to the party and creates a belief in his party and in the public that change might actually be possible. If, and it's a big if, UKIP win seats in parliament and continue their strong run, is Farage the man to build a real party of substance and depth? I'm not sure... He's a born campaigner and natural critic of status quo, but put him in a new context of building a serious party could lead the country and...?

My point is a simple one: Leaders and the context they find themselves in have to be a good match. Organisations need good corporate governance (selection, performance management, objectivity), leaders who are willing to adapt and learn within a changing context and importantly leaders who are willing to lead a team of people. Where an executive team leads, the organisation is far less likely to catch a cold when the context changes rapidly as genuine teams are able to bring to bear a far more diverse set of skills and capabilities than organisations built around the one great leader.

