

LEADERS NOT READY FOR CHANGE

BY STEVE BERNARD,
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Leadership remains a truly magical ingredient in organisational life that is highly prized for so many reasons. But the reality is that it doesn't appear at will just when required and is not a permanent state of being for any individual. It is more often the case that in their greatest hour of need, organisations or teams have a leadership crisis and 'those chosen' individuals are not ready to adapt or change enough to make a positive difference. So many questions remain:

- How do we increase the likelihood of leadership when we most need it?
- What are the components of a robust leadership development approach?
- Where do we focus our attention if we want to foster better leadership for the next 3 - 5 years?
- Does leadership investment really pay back; surely it boils down to tangible results at the end of the day?



Having spent numerous illuminating hours talking about talent development, leading organisations through change and how to achieve performance improvement, we hope to share some key insights from our real experiences about leadership. Our hope is that those who are thinking about leadership capability in their organisations and where it will come from will challenge themselves to raise their game, focus on the right questions to ask and source the right organisational interventions.

There are many myths in business, and no other topic evokes more than leadership. On a regular basis we are faced with perhaps the most stubborn and equally flawed of assumptions - that when we think of leadership we look upwards and outwards; not me but instead someone above me - typically the most senior figure I know. The confusion lies in the fact that as people are promoted and rise in any given hierarchy they often have access to a disproportionate level of control over resources and influence or power. Leadership this is not! Don't get me wrong, senior figures can and often are some of the greatest leaders around, but it is not a given.

Before moving on, it only seems fair to share what, in our view, represents some of the key principles around leadership. Thankfully gone are the days of personnel or senior managers espousing one singular set of personality traits as the 'definitive' answer to leadership.

Leadership is about *relationships*; it is about the realisation of *exceptional results*; it is about *creating a strong sense of followership* in others to be at their best to create those results; leaders know how to *create meaning for others* in any given context and live by an *overarching sense of purpose* that is genuine.

Jamie was a well-dressed and articulate Executive. Both well-educated and highly experienced, he was the perfect choice when Weider Steel acquired a new business which created a brand new manufacturing division in a growing niche market. Jamie was great at many things; having been an architect, run business P&Ls in other industries and with a natural flair for finance and strategy, he was gifted and got many things right. As well as being high margin with great growth potential, the new niche sector was highly competitive with some very dominant key customers who carried a lot of negotiating power. Within months the cracks started to appear; Jamie was not a manager of people and simply could not bring his people with him. Worse for the organisation he couldn't articulate the story and express where the division was going. If it didn't involve numbers or strategizing about theoretical concepts he was pretty lost. The division lost its way and was in the wilderness for his whole tenure just at the time when the wider business needed a strong contribution from that division. Ironically until just before his departure he was still acting as a Mentor to more junior leaders on the corporate sponsored Executive Leadership Programme.

So why is it that so many organisations face a leadership crisis often in their hour of need? Most organisations plan to fail in the leadership stakes simply because they often elevate the wrong people for the wrong reasons, often ignoring real acts of leadership and failing to support those with real potential. Many organisations are fixated on results, often financial – nobody generally gets fired for pleasing the Finance Director. They live under the false illusion that some of the short cuts they take, the bad practices they fall into and the responsibilities they ignore, don't have any tangible cost or consequence. If you can't see it and nobody says anything it must be OK!

This could not be further from the truth. For sustainable long term success, there are so many other considerations that fall outside of financial measurement. Organisations who don't have an engaged workforce, understand risk, aren't honest about their internal capabilities in key areas, have no universal or compelling strategy, allow poor behaviours & people practices will ultimately destroy value. Ironically their results could be so much better (yes financially too) but if they've never worked in this way, they fear trying to lead differently or struggle to change at a personal level when they do try.



So how do organisations really cultivate the right leaders? What is it that key people with influence need to change to avoid those leadership gaps and crises?

There are numerous strategies that can be employed when it comes to leading an organisation for long term performance. We will focus on just x3 here that identify most closely with avoiding risk and investing wisely in people and cultural development:

Coaching

It's often said that leadership or indeed any existence of influence in organisations can be a very lonely one. People can easily feel vulnerable and isolated. For this reason personalised support is particularly powerful.

The confidential and tailored nature of coaching, or similar 1:1 work can be truly transformational. In the space available here, leaders can allow themselves to be more vulnerable, open themselves to more challenge – safely and explore different ideas and changes at the habit / interpersonal level. This makes for much more robust and adaptable leadership back in their work context.

Structure Change

Organisations are pretty good at setting up their people to fail. It could be anything from a lack of alignment of between two sets of objectives; a lack of resources for critical initiatives, unrealistic plans or expectations. When supporting leadership, those with influence need to be mindful of exactly what structural support looks like and the encouragement and practical steps they can take. Having your people feel like they are they are on an episode of Mission Impossible every day is a sure fire way of extinguishing the flames of leadership potential and stoking up conflict or failure.

Team Dynamics

Thankfully people don't work in isolation; that's the beauty and challenge of organisational living. It is incredibly important to get the relationships and dynamics right around leaders. This fact is often heavily discounted in business; people seem either reluctant to do the work around Relationships at work or are happy to soldier on with enormous amounts conflict, negativity or inefficiency. Sponsors can play a key role here; for example when a leader is being subjective and either recruiting in their own image or stifling any form of healthy challenge, might need to caring eye of the sponsor simply to notice the trend or to challenge the behaviour. If done from a place of trust and good intentions, most leaders worth investing in will ultimately accept the benefit of being challenged.

We mustn't expect too much from our leaders, especially if we are not prepared to support them in the right way over time. We should consider it an act of neglect or even ignorance if we simply run away from the role we can all play here. While leadership requires personal strength and resilience, organisational life means leaders need the appropriate support. Sometimes it's as simple as giving them time to express themselves and explore both thoughts and feelings to regain objectivity. Leaders in business (regardless of where they sit) play a huge role in the lives of others. The least we can do is increase their likelihood of success so that when we need them – they'll be ready for us.

By Steve Bernard, February 2015