



BUSINESS LEADERSHIP TODAY

This article is the second in a series that reviews five key elements of Business Leadership: Strategic, Collaborative, Inspirational/Influential, Achievement and Conscious Leadership.

PART 2 – COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

Any business leader that makes unilateral decisions all the time is a dangerous leader and, given the constantly changing business environment, has the potential to bring about the rapid demise of any business. Business leaders operating in today's environment must be able to develop, integrate and leverage their human resources.

No single person has the intellectual ability to understand all of the issues even part of the time. It is a business leader's role to leverage others, internally and externally, who have an element of capacity that they do not. This capacity may be in the form of technical skill, practical experience, other relationships or access to resources. Therefore a key element of a leader's success (or otherwise) is their capacity to understand their own capabilities and leverage the ability of others.

While the logic of this is irrefutable it can be difficult to practice. The most common argument against collaborative leadership, particularly when it involves internal colleagues, is a lack of time. The "widgets," whether they are tax returns or invoices, need to be out of the door today (if not yesterday) and this is used to justify a more dictatorial approach to leadership. While there are occasions when this is true and this approach can be justified it also has some very real downsides.

If people are given no opportunity to contribute and have ownership of an outcome, over a period of time their levels of enthusiasm and therefore initiative will decrease, i.e. they will become more akin to a worker on a production line. This is not something leaders want in any organisation that operates in an evolving business environment. Inferior decisions and implementation issues will also arise. How often have we all heard others, stating after a problem has surfaced, "we could have told them there would be problems doing it that way, why didn't they talk to us?" If a firm is run by people who adopt a dictatorial approach then it will not be possible for it to operate as the sum of its parts. Individuals will focus on the benefits and issues impacting them rather than on those impacting the organisation as a whole. At best this will lead to inefficiencies, at worst it will lead to an organisation that is working against itself in constant conflict.

The other significant impediment to effective collaboration is a lack of understanding of other's perspectives and, in particular, their logic. If all you know is the opinion or stance of another then all you can do is agree or disagree with it. As a result there can be no collaboration as you have nothing to collaborate with. Inevitably this leads to competitive conflict which often leads to opposing parties forming alliances and attempting to "win" the disagreement through force of numbers rather than



collaboration. The logical reality is that both sides will have merit. If all parties made an effort to understand the logic of others they would be in a better position to mix and match ideas and strategies. This would ensure the most effective and holistic outcome is reached for the individuals concerned and the organisation as a whole.

Many, if not all, organisations have at least one change management programme in operation. However up to 70% of change initiatives fail to meet their stated objectives in full. In investigating the success of their own change initiatives General Electric found two interesting facts

- 100% of all changes evaluated as “Successful” had a good technical solution or approach
- Over 98% of all changes evaluated as “Unsuccessful” also had a good technical solution or approach

This would suggest that while the technical elements of any change are obviously critical, successful implementation is driven by something else. The ability of people to work and think collaboratively is vital.

Furthermore, with today’s tendencies towards flatter more flexible working structures to make organisations more responsive to changes in their environment, collaborative leadership is essential to consistently leverage the benefits of that structure. Without collaborative leadership a flat structure becomes as rigid and inflexible as the most hierarchical organisation that existed decades ago. It will fail to leverage its inherent ability, staff will narrow their focus, motivation will decrease and a culture of conflict is likely to develop.

There are two key characteristics that enable business leaders to create a more collaborative organisation. These characteristics will enable them to leverage the ability of others, create a more cohesive team environment and facilitate the development of holistic organisation-focussed ideas and strategies.

The first characteristic is empathy, i.e. the ability to understand the perspectives, thinking and feelings of those with whom they are working. This characteristic is related to Emotional Intelligence (EQ) in that it includes a leader’s ability to contemplate and account for other’s feelings and reactions to their own statements and actions. However, in addition it also involves actively asking for the perspectives, logic and feelings of others to confirm (or not) pre existing ideas in relation to them. Examples might include “what is your position on this,” “why do you think that” and “how do you feel about this change?” In a contentious meeting this characteristic would require a leader to suspend their initial judgements and question others to better understand them before developing a position. This can be summarised as understanding before being understood. You only need to ask yourself how often in the workplace do you feel you have been misunderstood, or not understood at all, to get an idea of how rare this characteristic really is.



The second characteristic is the ability to facilitate intellectual team-working, i.e. getting people to share and link ideas to form concepts and strategies that are more powerful and complete than any of the individual's original ideas. This involves ensuring that dialogue continues until a comprehensive set of team concepts has been created rather than letting the discussing break down into one person's idea versus that of another. This discussion should be about getting participants to explore each others ideas rather than defending their own ideas, therefore it is constructive in nature rather than defensive. This characteristic helps to ensure the diversity of the group is leveraged to enrich the ideas and strategies created.

In organisations that have an internally competitive culture or there are very different personalities it takes a leader who is particularly strong to facilitate team-working. For example, where one person within a group is very risk averse and another is a risk taker it will be challenging to facilitate and build mutual understanding. However as no organisation can survive by being completely risk averse (their environment would pass them by making them obsolete) or by ignoring risk, the ability to facilitate and leverage the perspective of others is a key characteristic to outperforming competitors.

An organisation's collaborative leadership will determine its ability to leverage and get maximum value from its intellectual resources. Collaborative ability equips leaders to enhance their own and others' business relationships, be they internal or external. Collaborative leadership is an essential factor in organisations achieving sustainable high performance.

Simon Tedstone
Director



Leadership and Human Capital Consulting

Mobile +61 438 552 422
<http://www.linkedin.com/in/simontedstone>
www.leadingchange.net.au