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Leadership through times of crisis – a view from Sales Code

What makes a great leader?

The question of what makes a great leader has always been up for debate: most contemporary British Prime Ministers struggle to live in the shadow of Winston Churchill, a mythologised figure now beyond the living memory of most of us. Few can deny that he failed to deliver results in his time, and yet most of us would not look to aristocrats from colonial British history for leadership in the 21st century.

The notion of leadership has never been more contentious. The leadership dichotomy - what we need in leaders and what we *think* we need - has been shown in stark contrast during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic: a crisis that has highlighted the strengths and weaknesses in all of us. Globally, our elected leaders are under ever greater scrutiny, as they face scenarios once deemed unimaginable. Individually, within our communities and places of employment, leaders are facing higher pressure to protect their businesses and circumstances whilst trying to maintain strong connections with their employees.

In October of 2020, the election for arguably the greatest – certainly the most *iconic* – leadership position came to a boil as the world looked on with grim fascination. The United States presidential debates showed us both the stereotype of who is typically seen as fit to lead – old, white, male and over six feet – and two diametrically opposed personalities. Donald Trump's belligerence, aggression and forcefulness was contrasted with the more mild-mannered, respectful and compassionate style of challenger Joe Biden. According to Gallup research, Americans perceive Biden as 'likeable', but Trump as 'strong'. 56% of respondents stated that Trump is a strong and decisive leader; only 46% say the same of Biden.

Astonishing though his presence on the world stage may be, in fact, one of Trump's selling points has long been his consistency. Very little of his somewhat chaotic leadership in 2020 could be described as a surprise, based on what was known of him long before he ever thought of running for the presidency. In the final analysis, nearly 74 million people decided he was a good leader for the most powerful country on earth.

Perhaps the tide is finally turning against macho leaders in business and politics as international responses to the Covid-19 pandemic have truly challenged our perceptions of what makes a good leader. The success of female politicians in leading the economic and medical emergencies caused by Covid-19 has turned the dial away from the 'strongman', or 'tough guy' leader towards perhaps a gentler approach. Women have proved themselves equally capable, with evidence from the Guardian Newspaper strongly suggesting that nations with female leaders (like Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand and Angela Merkel in Germany) have so far outperformed their male counterparts.

This is not to say that women are better leaders, in and of themselves – but the macho image is not one they are likely to find themselves leaning into. Cultural perceptions of women as more cautious and compassionate may have offered an advantage in a year that has been personally and professionally challenging to so many of us. In fact, their example may offer a fresh take on what success in leadership truly requires.

What we look for in leaders hasn't necessarily changed – but the demands a crisis place upon them have never been higher. The times we're living and working in right now are unique to all of us, and yet times of crisis, difficulty and fear are not. Every business will face huge challenges today, and in the future. What matters is getting leadership right, right *now*.

How are staff experiencing leadership?

Contrary to how many traditional male political leaders appear to feel, success is not measured by the self-confidence of the leader, if it fails to lead to measurably improved outcomes in those being led. Gallup's four universal needs of followers from leaders – trust, compassion, stability and hope – are a highly effective starting points, from which action must be taken.

However, action cannot be taken without an understanding of your followers' current position: as identified by the Harvard Business Review, taking the broad view necessary of good leadership risks a disconnect with the 'Human Factors', which is a significant disadvantage.

Focussing on a clear plan of action and keeping employees informed can make significant inroads in reducing anxiety and uncertainty: in the absence of hard data, and in a broader environment that is fuelled by fear,

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human nature is likely to fill in the gaps with negativity. Communicating with employees and engaging in a two-way conversation that enables leadership to respond to the needs of the situation, is the best way to craft a compassionate leadership approach.

Leading through uncertainty

Certain kinds of leaders appeal to us the most in certain scenarios. The aforementioned 'strongman' trend occurred as a response to the need for certainty, as explained by *The Atlantic*:

'Strongmen prosper as leaders because they promise certainty in uncertain times. They offer a simple enemy and present themselves as the only champion against it. The more control they have—by delegitimizing opposition leaders and the press—the better this strategy works.'

However, in our current globalised environment, this leadership style becomes less appealing to many of us, and it becomes more difficult for us to genuinely engage with any leader offering a utopian vision of total certainty. In our hearts we know that nobody can claim to know what the future holds. The news changes daily, and we are all personally aware of the ever-changing nature of the world we are living and working in.

And yet, as individuals, we thrive on certainty, and what's more, the belief that we have control over our environments. Among 3,000 US employees with stressful jobs, tracked over 20 years, those who reported having more control over their work were less likely to suffer from poor health and early death.

How are leaders to respond? Dishonesty, or even disingenuousness, is a poor strategy. Equally, favouring control over order can lead to micromanagement that compromises leadership. McKinsey insights suggest that offering 'predictability' is the best compromise. Psychologist Martin Seligman's research on 'learned helplessness' includes a hypothesis, inspired by the population responding to London's World War Two air raid sirens. The reliability of the system, even during a period of overwhelming crisis and fear, allowed Londoners to continue their day-to-day lives with relative normalcy, until the sirens alerted them to the immediate danger and need to take action.

Threats to our lives and livelihoods are less harmful to our mental wellbeing if we understand our immediate situation, and when fear and anxiety are in fact justified by events. If, on the other hand, safety is never experienced, the loss of control results in 'constant anxiety, despair, and, ultimately, physical and mental illness.

Communication and prioritised updates, in which the information employees *need* to know is shared, is crucial. So is structured change. Many businesses are, currently, being forced to cut costs, which this year has involved furloughing but next year is likely to mean redundancies. Watching colleagues, either close to you or in separate departments, being laid off is likely to induce anxiety. Without communication and clarity, rumour-spreading and long-term negativity are likely to set in.

Excellent leadership at this juncture does not mean disingenuous positivity – it means considerate and compassionate honesty. Giving employees clarity over their position, time-frames in which decisions will be made, and maximum opportunities to take actions in favour of their own futures will hand them back the control they deserve. And for continuing workers, unaffected by such changes, this kind of leadership will give them the certainty and honesty required for them to focus on their immediate roles and engage with an improved future.

Leading with hope and positivity

In the middle of a crisis, it's easy to forget what we all look for in management: positivity, inspiration and motivation. Long-term vision does not need to be a key component of every single conversation a leader has, but it should be behind every interaction, driving progress in every employee and therefore across a business. Without positivity injected into a leadership approach, that goes beyond surface-level reassurance and crisis-focussed communication, the best one can expect from stakeholders and staff is neutrality.

It's inevitable that leadership through periods of crisis and change will end up focussing energy on the issues immediately at hand. Ignoring concerns as sizeable as the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the seismic workplace changes that have occurred as a result, would be disastrous. But leadership should not solely be about putting out fires; in fact, it should not be about it at all. In the highest sense, leadership must continue

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to provide vision, inspiration, and motivation. That can be as big as five-year plan, or as small as a cheery demeanour on group calls.

Bill Schaninger, senior partner of McKinsey & Co, and leadership expert notes that 'we've seen COVID-19 accelerating the shift away from classic authoritarian leadership to new forms of distributed decision making'. Collaboration and trust in each other are cornerstones of business success in 2020: decisions are being made based on shared information, whether that's scientific experts and public authorities or trusting that the person next to us on the underground is behaving responsibly about any possible symptoms.

Entrepreneur Adrian Gore, writing for the Financial Times, recently wrote that making 'interconnected systems effective requires the opposite of negativity. They are best served by trust, co-operation and collaboration, and this is created by seeking positive signals as well.' Collaboration in teams and businesses takes effort without a shared office space, and therefore requires encouragement from the leadership team. Decisions may not be being made unilaterally from the top down, but sustainable behaviours must be modelled that way.

In the same FT article, Gore argued that 'bold leadership' was needed in trying times, instead of incrementalism, even while 'pursuing prudence and innovation'. We expect, and need, our leaders to take strong steps forward, even with emotional intelligence toward the staff being brought on the journey and sensitive understanding of the risks and rewards at stake.

Greater and more flexible expectations of leaders are not new to 2020. In September of 2019, McKinsey identified four qualities needed in a modern leader of agile organisations:

1. Visionary – 'shape the emergence of a clear, compelling purpose and vision'
2. Architect – 'designing the organization as an open and empowered system'
3. Coach – 'evolving a culture of learning throughout the organization'
4. Catalyst – 'unleash energy through the system'

None of these exist solely as a response to crisis, and none of them cease to be valuable during one. All of them are still very much needed now, and will be in the future. Protecting people and performance must go hand in hand with a positive attitude, delivered through understanding of employees, if you want to ensure that staff stick for the long run.

If you don't know ask...

As in the case of an extended crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, failure to imagine a better, improved future can lead to not only massive employee disengagement, but also to significant failings in wellbeing that could have been avoided. Gallup research has identified a 48% greater likelihood that people with low engagement and wellbeing will leave your company – not an outcome that any respectable leader would be happy about.

We encourage you to ask yourself: how are your employees, staff and 'followers' experiencing your leadership? If you don't know, you need to ask. A path forward, with immediate needs met and a long-term vision provided by management, is very much needed, in times of crisis more than any other.

For more information about Sales Code and our leadership and team development programs please email

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