

Defining what it takes to forge ahead and guide others

I teach a course in leadership at St. Francis Xavier University in which I try to answer the question “what is leadership?” It seems that we are always searching for strong leaders in all walks of life, no more so than in the insurance industry with its many complex issues and challenges.

A cynic might observe that leadership is something we want more of, until we get it, and then we want less of it or at least we want a different kind of leadership. Those CEOs who take an active leadership role in the industry are used to experiencing this “whipsaw” effect.

It is certainly true to say that leadership, and the lack of it, is a popular subject these days. At last count there were more than 400 books available with the word “leader” or “leadership” in the title. The most popular ones promise easy steps and quick fixes to the leadership shortfall. Anyone who has tried to lead can tell you that it is not that easy.

The interest is understandable. Lack of leadership in business and government, or more properly the wrong kind of leadership, has created a morass of ethical problems. But we are too narrowly focused if we think that the leadership deficit is solely a contemporary problem. It has been a concern in all epochs. The great writers of western history, literature and philosophy, including Plato, Machiavelli, Shakespeare, Carlyle, Orwell, Emerson, and the poets Tennyson, Spender, and Frost, to name a few, have been intrigued by who leads us and what makes them tick. I use them all in my class.

THEORIES ABOUND

The earliest thinking on this subject can

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THE ART AND SCIENCE OF LEADERSHIP



be lumped into what is sometimes called the “great man” theory. It was thought that great leaders possessed some core list of traits that singled them out for leadership at an early age. Many people also believed that leadership ability is inherent in the individual and that it cannot be learned. Devotees of leadership studies expended a great deal of energy compiling endless lists of useful traits in order to try and predict who would make an outstanding leader. In the end, we have concluded that no single set of traits can predict those who will lead well and who will fail.

Take, for example, the idea that leaders tend to be tall and good-looking and apply these traits to Napoleon and Abraham Lincoln. Both were leaders of historic importance. Now it is arguable that Napoleon was good-looking — Josephine certainly thought so — but it cannot be said that he was tall. Lincoln, on the other hand, was very tall but it is a stretch to say that he was handsome. I deliberately chose these traits because, while they are distinctly secondary in any list of traits, they best illustrate the pitfalls of looking for physical characteristics as keys to leadership success.

On a more serious note, many have said that great leaders possess the core traits of charisma and intelligence. Most modern thinking debunks even these ideals. In fact, charisma, far from being desirable in a leader, is now thought to be potentially harmful.

Leaders need to possess the ability to attract and motivate followers. But too much “blaze of being” at the top can be destructive to the bond between followers and leaders. After all, the followers know who is really doing the gut work in the organization, despite all the puff pieces about the leader in the business press. Indeed, to bet the farm on the Houdini-like capabilities of one person is far-fetched when one thinks of the complexity and scope of most modern corporations.

What about intelligence? There is no doubt that good leaders possess strong conceptual abilities. But they need not be superior in this respect to those around them. Simply put, the way we measure intelligence — through tests of individuals — is no way to determine how they will perform in groups and in

intense interaction with others. It is superiority in this latter area — in so-called “emotional intelligence” rather than demonstrably superior IQ — that marks successful leaders.

This is not to say that traits of a leader do not count. They do. But possession of some or all of the so-called desirable traits is no guarantee of leadership success. That is because leadership is not

solely about the leader. It is also very much about the context in which leaders are trying to lead and about the willingness of followers to follow. Despite his obvious leadership skills, Winston Churchill was kept very much in the background in the lead-up to World War II because government policy was for appeasement, not war, and very few in power were willing to take the side of

“yesterday’s man” as he was labeled. That all changed after Germany invaded Poland.

So what is it that makes a leader successful? A distilled version of the answer as it has evolved in my leadership class suggests the following key elements of successful leadership.

VISION AND COMMUNICATION

The fundamental task of leadership is the creation of a future direction for the company. There are various terms used for this; vision, dreamscape, and strategic plan are just a few of them. In essence, through the vision a leader challenges the status quo, the way things are, and creates the prospect of a hopeful future or, the way things are going to be. A good vision serves to recruit people to the task at hand and motivates them to work together. It also informs them about what behaviours and outcomes the CEO and the board of directors values and expects.

The second element of vision and leadership is good communication. A vision must be framed in no-nonsense language so that there is no ambiguity about the main message. Beyond that, the leader needs to communicate the vision day and night using every possible communication channel throughout the organization and to outside stakeholders.

He or she must be relentless in promulgating the details of the preferred future, how it differs from the past, and how people will know that progress is being made. This not a job to be delegated. And the message must be repeated many times, almost until ears bleed, before it begins to sink in.

EMPOWERMENT AND CELEBRATION

Michael Porter and his associates have written an excellent article in the *Harvard Business Review* (October, 2004) about the seven surprises for CEOs. One of the more challenging sections of this article is the notion that it is a poor idea for leaders to give too many detailed and direct orders about the work others are tasked to perform. Sure, there are rare ‘burning platform’ situations where the necessity to revert to the military command and control style may be required. Most of the time, however, this style is unnecessary and counter-productive.

In successful modern corporations the onus is on teamwork and true leadership involves empowering others to do their

jobs. There are very good reasons why the empowerment of others is key to great leadership. Every leader needs help to succeed. He or she needs to inspire creativity and risk-taking at all levels of the organization. Trust, that elusive glue of organization life, needs to flourish. Leaders whose primary style is micro-management will soon find themselves overwhelmed as others around them begin to wait for instruction instead of forging ahead on their own armed with the knowledge that they have the mandate, trust and training to do their jobs.

To some, celebration sounds frivolous. But what better way to recognize important moments in a company, or milestones of plan achievement? These are more than parties, although on its own there is nothing wrong with a good party. They are ways to say thank you (simple, greatly appreciated and too little used) for exceptional effort, they highlight valued behaviour for others to see and they provide excellent opportunities to reinforce, once again, the vision of the leader. Leaders who lead well know how to celebrate wins and how important those celebrations are to the culture of their organizations.

PERSISTENCE

Leaders have the guts to act on their instincts where others might hesitate and be full of doubt. They also have the ability to maintain their optimism where others lose hope.

One further characteristic that has received more attention lately is resiliency. Leaders have the capacity to deal with stress and to rebound from setbacks. This is sometimes hard to get across to people who view leaders as super-human and beyond failure.

Leaders do fail but they learn from their mistakes, re-group, and try again. This demonstration of persistence — a combination of courage, optimism and resiliency — sets leaders apart from the rest.

INTEGRITY

One of the most important lessons leaders learn is that when it comes to integrity they are “the visual.” Leaders operate under a microscope in which every move and utterance is intensely scrutinized and speculated about. Their behaviour sets the example for right conduct in the company.

Good companies have a very clear

code of conduct that tells employees what behaviour is expected of them. Breaches of the code are not tolerated and remedial action is swift. There is nothing more destructive to trust within a company than lofty codes of conduct that are not enforced and a management team that is perceived as saying one thing and doing another.

LEGACY

Some people think that this is an over-worked theme. Nevertheless, good leaders build something of lasting value. Most often this is simply that the company works better than when they assumed the leadership role. The key measure in business is a viable business strategy and strong bottom-line results.

There are other important measures of legacy. One of them certainly is a robust value system that guides employee behaviour and which is deeply ingrained in the corporate culture. The other is less tangible. Call it “organizational confidence.” It is best expressed by the employee who says, “I do not know what problems lurk around the corner, but I know we will be able to deal with them.”

Can leadership be learned? My emphatic answer is “yes.” although perhaps not in the usual way. Business schools can teach you about the characteristics of good leadership but they cannot teach the important intuitive elements. These must be learned through observation of good and bad leadership in action.

I have seen both in my career and I would say I have learned as much from the bad as from the good. The main point is that while not everyone will be a CEO or deputy minister everyone can improve their leadership skills at work and in the community if they possess the requisite desire and capacity to learn and the simple ability to observe what is around them.

By the way, among those 400 books about leadership mentioned earlier, the best of the more recent ones in this writer’s opinion are *Winning* by Jack Welch and *The Finer Points of Leadership* by Michael Feiner. Put them on your summer reading list. ∞

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