

Lessons in leadership from Brexit

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18 March 2019

The UK's Brexit debacle may be excruciating to watch but it is providing us with some invaluable lessons in leadership.

So many lessons, in fact, that it is difficult to know where to begin. So I suggest we start with reminding ourselves of what a good leader actually looks like ...

A good leader:

1. Brings clarity to an organisation. Has a clear strategy that is aspirational and yet achievable; built upon a clear vision of what they are seeking to achieve – and why.
2. Sets outcomes that are clear and substantial, not superficial vagaries, and works with their people to build a transparent plan to implement the outcomes.
3. Engages with their people to unearth and understand the implications and consequences of the strategy / change - and how best to overcome them.
4. Understands that 21st Century leadership is a team game; not an individual sport. They create a cohesive leadership team comprised of diverse leaders whose weaknesses are supported by the strengths of their fellow team members.
5. Is never complacent. They continually ask themselves “What could possibly go wrong?”
6. Listens. Poor leaders don't listen to understand; they listen to reply. Good leaders know that effective communication is two-way.
7. Deals in truths. They don't bend facts to support their opinions. Their opinions are formed through insight gained through the analysis of facts.
8. Understands that emotion trumps logic every time. People only change if they want to. A leader's job is to help people to want to change, which means addressing their concerns and appealing to their emotions - in a manner that is genuine.
9. Is trusted. Their people believe that they genuinely care – and put the best interests of the organisation, its people and its customers ahead of their own self-interest.
10. Inspires and enables people to be their best.
11. Lives the organisation's values.
12. Creates more leaders, not more followers.
13. Is authentic.

While even the best leaders will struggle to live up to all of these ideals all of the time, the three prominent Brexit leaders - Cameron, May and Corbyn - collectively fail almost every one of them.

David Cameron's Achilles' Heel was complacency.

David Cameron didn't entertain for one moment that a majority of voters could possibly vote to leave the European Union.

As Jacinda Arden, Prime Minister of NZ, says: "Empathy makes me a strong leader." Cameron didn't even try to empathise with or understand his electorate. If he had, he would have uncovered the deep-seated resentment felt by millions of voters, especially those who had been left behind by globalisation and forced to pay for the hubris of the banking industry through lower wages, lost benefits, fewer public services and higher costs of living. He had no idea as to the extent of the electorate's dissatisfaction with the status quo.

He also forgot that emotion trumps logic every time. The campaign he led to Remain in the EU was full of facts (with a hefty dose of fear) and completely lacking in emotion. The electorate was hungry for emotionally positive reasons to stay in the EU – and none was forthcoming. "Better together" was accurate but uninspiring. It summed up the Remain campaign perfectly.

He admitted this schoolboy error when he opened a conference at which I was also speaking last year. Hindsight is a wonderful thing.

In contrast, the Leave campaign was almost entirely emotional. They appealed directly to the emotions of many millions of voters with a brilliant slogan, "Vote Leave Take Back Control", a catchy "Brexit" name and, most important of all, the promise of a better tomorrow outside of the EU. As readers of The Change Catalyst will know, emotion is four times more powerful than logic.

Unfortunately, David Cameron will not be remembered as the Prime Minister who legalised same-sex marriage or brought the nation's finances under control or made the Conservative Party electable after eighteen years in the political wilderness.

He will be known forever as the man who caused Brexit.

Theresa May's biggest failings as a leader are her inability to collaborate and her inability to engage with people.

Yes, she was dealt an awful hand by Cameron; a hand that was made worse by the constant stream of untruths and unrealistic expectations that still continue to this day from the Arch-Brexiters in her party. But she then managed to transform a difficult hand into an almost impossible one by losing her parliamentary majority after an utterly pointless election in 2017. However, the way she has played that horrible hand since then has been abysmal.

A leader without a majority must be able to do one thing really well – collaborate. Collaboration requires listening and genuine two-way communication. None of these words appear to be in May's lexicon. When faced with a situation in which there was a majority in the House of Commons against every perceivable option, a good leader would have reached out across the aisle on a quest to look for the areas of commonality to build upon. A good leader would have worked to construct a deal that the majority of parliament could vote for.

Collaboration isn't a sign of weakness. In a leader, it is a sign of extraordinary strength.

A good leader would have communicated clearly and engaged with the electorate from the outset. They would have sought to understand precisely why people voted to leave and what sort of Brexit they had voted for – by talking to them. A good leader would have spent time explaining the Brexit options available and the fact that every single one of us will need to make compromises to arrive at a version of Brexit that parliament could vote for. Then they would have worked with all of the factions within parliament to build such a deal.

Instead, May went it alone. Declaring it to be “the will of the people”, she swiftly ruled out free movement, a customs union, the single market and any authority of the European Court of Justice – simply assuming that these were the four elements that the people had demanded.

The problem is that Theresa May is uber-logical, but voters aren't. We humans don't make decisions based on logic. We make decisions based on emotion. Boris could have told her that. It is entirely logical to assume that if people voted to Leave, they voted against every one of her four ‘red lines’ above. However logical this assumption may be, it is simply wrong.

Allow me to demonstrate. According to a BBC / CommRes poll immediately after the referendum, a massive 35% of Leave voters still wanted to stay in the single market. To show how irrelevant logic can be to human decision-making, 15% of Remain voters wanted to leave the single market!

Voters simply don't pay attention to the details. Some thought that removing freedom of movement would only apply to Europeans in Britain. As they sat supping San Miguels on the balconies of their new Spanish retirement apartments, they were shocked to discover that FoM was reciprocal! A recent Sky News poll found that 25% of viewers think that “no deal” means “no Brexit”.

Confusion abounds and 33 months on from the referendum the “will of the people” remains a mystery. But not to her. On the 13th March, after her deal had been soundly rejected by Parliament the previous day for the second time, she still proclaimed: “I may not have my own voice but I understand the voice of the people.” She doesn't. The moment she became Prime Minister back in July of 2016, she should have ‘sought first to understand’ to quote Stephen Covey. But she didn't.

We don't know what Theresa May's vision is for the UK. Her first speech as PM was inspirational and wide-reaching; promising to lead a government “for the many, not the few”. However her initial soaring rhetoric has morphed into the meaningless sound bite: “Brexit means Brexit”.

She is determined to grind her deal through parliament without giving any ground whatsoever - however many attempts it may take. She is now threatening parliamentarians with a potential 2 year extension to the start of Brexit if they don't vote for her deal; a deal they have soundly rejected twice before and a deal that her own civil servants have concluded will actually make Britain poorer. On the way, ‘cabinet responsibility’, once a cornerstone of UK government and management theory worldwide, has been shattered.

Theresa May is stuck in a bygone era. To her, leadership is a solo pursuit, not a team game. Consequently, 35 government ministers have resigned in the 21 months since she formed her minority government, including two Brexit Ministers – so far. To May, a leader must have all the answers; a leader is someone who makes decisions and demands that people follow her.

But they aren't.

Jeremy Corbyn trails Theresa May by 18% to 33% in the latest 'Best PM' polls.

That sentence sums up Jeremy Corbyn's leadership. Even with all of the in-fighting, incompetence and blinkered leadership on display from Theresa May's government, roughly twice as many people still prefer her to Corbyn, according to the latest polls by Opinium, YouGov and Survation.

And yet ... as I write this piece, a 15 March poll by Survation has just been published that puts Labour ahead of the Tories for the first time in terms of voting intentions – by 38% to 34%. The Opinium Research poll (13-15 March) has it the other way around.

What is safe to say that almost any other leader would be streets ahead in the polls. Jeremy is an activist. He is a protestor. Yes, he did a brilliant job of garnering the support of young people across the UK during the last election and has been the main reason for an incredible groundswell of people joining the British Labour Party – which at 540,000 members is the largest political party in terms of membership in Europe. It seems he is a very good activist. But the electorate is having a hard time seeing him as the leader of a nation.

Like May, Corbyn has been more interested in assuming power and keeping his party together than finding a way out of this mess for the good of the country. Like May, he only seems to listen to a close cabal of advisers

Also like May, his Brexit strategy has lacked clarity. He has preferred to sit back and watch the carnage unfold. One gets the impression that he is most comfortable when in opposition. Actual government can be tough – just ask Nick Clegg. Labour's six tests for May's deal were disingenuous and designed simply to oppose. His statement that he could have negotiated a better deal rang hollow. His sensible ideas, espoused far too late to have any impact, of a new customs union and "an appropriate say on any new trade deal terms" are being ignored – as he knew they would be.

Corbyn's focus, like May, has been on the numbers. And it is here that he is most conflicted. Around 63% of Labour voters voted Remain and yet due to the anomalies of the electoral system, around 60% of Labour electorates actually voted Leave! To add to the confusion, all but ten Labour MPs voted Remain. The vast majority of Labour members and Labour voters want a second referendum. Corbyn does not. He wants to leave. But he can't admit it as he is afraid of losing votes. If he wishes to be PM, he will have to hold London seats and gain seats in Scotland – both fiercely Remain.

His splinters must be terribly painful from sitting on the fence since June 2016.

One thing we can say about Jeremy Corbyn is that he is authentic. His views don't appear to have changed, or mellowed, for forty years. His dream of a socialist utopia is too far to the left for most of the UK. We look at Cuba and Venezuela - and shudder. We hear John McDonald's plan to seize 10% of the shares in every UK company with more than 250 employees – and convulse.

Yet the electorate is crying out, literally, for a party that can deliver a fairer society and provide genuine hope for those who have been left behind. This cry manifested itself as a protest vote for Leave in the 2016 referendum - of the 65 worst 'cold spot' regions of the UK that had been left behind economically, 63 of them voted to leave the EU (Source: UK Social Mobility Commission). This was a vote for change, any change, by people who felt they had nothing to lose.

A political manifesto with the ambition to reduce inequality; properly fund our schools, NHS, police forces, social housing, youth programmes and the welfare system; invest in vocational training, small business and regional UK; reduce under-employment and (somehow) fund it all through a fairer tax system – would be extremely attractive to most of the electorate.

Ever since the 2016 referendum, the scene has been set for a strong opposition leader to emerge. One who could look and act like the national leader the country sorely needs. One who could bring people together to find a deal that parliament could vote for and to try and heal the rifts caused by Brexit.

To date, the electorate does not seem to have believed that Jeremy Corbyn is that leader.

Time for change

It is time for new leaders to step forward. Perhaps Amber Rudd for the Tories and Keir Starmer or Jess Phillips for Labour. Leaders who aren't stuck in a bygone age. Leaders who can collaborate and not see it as a sign of weakness. Leaders who people can trust.

But whichever leaders do emerge to lead the UK through the incredibly challenging times ahead, I implore them to keep the list at the beginning of this essay within their line of sight at all times.

To be the best leaders they can possibly be.

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