

21st Century Leadership: a team game not a solo pursuit

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Three key themes emerge consistently from the delegates on my Leading Change workshops when we discuss leadership:

1. Leadership is leading change. Anything else is simply managing the status quo.
2. What great leaders do and how they make you feel.
3. Leadership is a team game not a solo pursuit.

Great leaders aren't self-absorbed, they aren't bullies and they aren't loners. They realise that empathy is strength; that 'bull-dozing' their opinions through others is no way to engage people. They know that the best way to deliver successful and sustainable change is through building a highly effective team and engaging people to deliver a clear and compelling strategy.

While 21st Century leadership may be in short supply in Westminster and Washington at the moment, it is self-evident and thriving in the world of business. Today's business leaders no longer sit perched upon their throne, aloof and alone at the pinnacle of a hierarchical org chart.

Today's successful business leaders understand that long term value for their organisation lies in team strength rather than individual strength.



They understand that several brains genuinely working together are far better than one working alone. They also know that telling people to change doesn't work – they need to help people to want to change.

21st Century leaders recognise that a truly collaborative leadership team will not only achieve better results but that it is the best way for an organisation to optimise its success given the tsunami of data and information which modern leaders need to manage and the permanent state of change that is required to survive, let alone thrive, in today's volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world.

21st Century leaders recognise their own personal weaknesses and seek to fill them with the strengths of others.

21st Century leaders realise that their individual success will be determined by the success of the organisation. And the success of the organisation will be determined by the clarity of the strategy and the success of its people.

21st Century leaders are visionaries, team-builders, coaches, mentors and obstacle-removers.

They aren't ego-driven authoritarians.

They are 'first among equals'.

21st Century leadership starts with a clear strategy that is both inspirational and achievable.

A successful strategy includes numbers, a narrative and a credible rationale – people need to know what they are setting out to achieve, what success will look and feel like, how it will be measured and why this strategy is the one they should eagerly embrace. The strategy must be clear to everyone in the organisation, not just those at the top, for the simple reason that if it isn't clear, it won't be delivered.

A successful strategy is built upon objective facts and insight rather than opinions. They include detailed, objective external and internal analysis: assessment of the external environment, trends, threats, opportunities, and the needs, wants and aspirations of all stakeholders – starting with the customers. It is based upon an objective assessment of internal strengths, weaknesses and capabilities. Success demands that your people are engaged in this analysis to ensure it is a) thorough, b) unearths people's biases and concerns, and c) embraced.

A successful strategy is based on a clear purpose – absolute clarity of why your company exists and for whom.

Understanding implications is critical.

The vast majority of strategies fail to deliver what they set out to achieve – often because the implications of the strategy are not properly understood before the business commits to it and implementation begins. The consequences of the desired strategy, the implications to the organisation and optimum mitigating actions need to be explored – by the entire leadership / management team – as part of the strategy development process. It engages and aligns everybody involved.

A detailed implementation plan is an integral component of any good strategy.

A strategy that can't be implemented is a complete waste of time.

The plan must be developed collaboratively for it has to be the people's plan, not the leader's plan.

It should clarify the key strategic constraints and detail how the business will overcome the challenges and obstacles to success.

Culture is the single most important enabler of success for any organisation.

It not only dictates how the strategy will be delivered but also if it is delivered. An organisation's culture is the sum of the attitudes and behaviours of every single one of its people. It is reflected in the nature of its processes, the way it conducts its employee surveys and what it does with the results of its customer feedback.

How an organisation treats its people, how its people interact with one another, and the way they interact with their customers, partners and suppliers determines the quality of the organisation's output and its reputation.

Culture drives customer service, proposition development, sales – the entire performance of an organisation is dependent upon it.

A highly effective leadership team comprised of ‘leaders of leaders’.

A highly effective leadership is comprised of leaders who individually and collectively live up to the organisation’s values and behave in a way that is genuinely collaboratively and overtly has the best interests of the organisation as their number one priority.

Not only does the 21st Century leader populate his/her leadership team with other 21st Century leaders but they also ensure that the other team members have different strengths that compensate for the weaknesses of the others – a genuine team. While the 21st Century leader strives to develop and enhance the capability of every individual team member, they are quick to remove old school authoritarian leaders from the group. Sometimes, if you can’t change the people, you have to change the people.

Only your people can deliver your strategy.

Only your people can deliver the constant change that your organisation requires. 21st Century leaders don’t label their people as ‘human resources’. They are the lifeblood of the organisation, without whom nothing is possible. 21st Century leaders continually bring in new skills to the organisation whilst also investing in their existing people - today’s business world incessantly requires new capabilities and new skills and not all of it can be developed or grown internally.

21st Century leaders equip their organisations and their people to embrace change and thrive in a rapidly-changing world.

Delivering results through their people is the primary purpose of any leader.

21st Century leaders know how to delegate and empower. They also know how to enable their people to take responsibility and deliver.

21st Century leaders separate the ‘important’ from the ‘urgent’.

They are brave enough to think and act long-term. Business in the 21st Century is about sustainability – sustainable organisations with sustainable (and ethical) business practices delivering sustainable performance.

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