



Cowering is not leading

By Stephen Karle

THE NETWORK
OF LEADERS

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A deep crisis of confidence is afflicting a big and broad cross-section of the UK's highest business echelons. This crisis is giving rise to a spreading feeling of paralysis about medium-term planning and spawning a rash of short-termist cost savagery.

Despite the genuine need for many businesses to re-engineer their operations to meet dire economic trading conditions, the syncopated delivery of some recent 'back to core' business culling measures bears the rank odour of panic management.

It is against this background that employees are losing confidence in the leadership skills of their employers' board teams. The further weakening of directors' self-belief in the face of wave upon wave of one-dimensional, but ferocious public and media castigation of their past efforts at leadership is not helping with the quality of thought or actions. Coupled with funding deficiencies and (in some sectors) regulatory action, there are clearly some difficult times ahead.

Now is a time for the nation's business leaders to re-assure and re-convince their people that they have the qualities and the ideas to steer their organisations through to better times. It is also the time to realise the depth of genuine leadership habits lying dormant in their teams. Leading companies need great leaders, but will be better able to build on their latent strengths by leveraging the power of the good leaders within.

KEY TRAITS OF GREAT LEADERS

Let's attempt to capture the traits we have seen and ask, again, whether they can be rekindled:

Courage and resilience - the ability to resist the pressures of different market conditions over time.

Energy and strength of character - to withstand the intense environment at the head of an organisation.

Desire and willpower - but exercised within a framework of clear and admirable personal values, which are reflected in the way the business is run.

Competitiveness - it is not possible to avoid being compared to predecessors, peers or major competitors. It is pivotal to be the deliverer of performances significantly ahead of market averages; notwithstanding the current and generally-held view that overheated performances are neither desirable nor sustainable. We are all aware of the mediocrity of operational performance within many business sectors; it is out-performance here we are seeking not bonus-driven, explosive hype.

Flexibility - it remains desirable to be able to adapt quickly to market change. It is an unquestionable fact that evolutionary consequences happen to most top companies when viewed over anything other than the short term.

Respect for others - a deeply held and sincere respect for others is crucial, regardless of their status in the organisation.

The ability to act as a steward - a view with which some well-rated leaders, including Jack Welch, used to take issue.

Planning for succession - it's important to understand the imperative of developing employees and teams for the longer run; for nurturing their progress - even to the leader's own apparent personal disadvantage.

A deep urge to improve the world - whether it is in the spheres of business, social or political environments, there is, at least, a desire to establish clear goals and to unswervingly persuade others to pursue them with you.

Smart and commercially-minded - there are no prizes for naïveté.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

The traits, characteristics and beliefs of leaders are important, but it is behaviours and habits that change things. Leaders now need to come forward to champion new strategic plans, re-energise their organisations and set the objectives and success measures for their companies.

Where will reputations be made over the next business cycle?

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