

Values and leadership in the current climate

Are the values required for leadership in hard times any different to those required when the going is good?



By Ruth Simpson

The change in the economic climate from 16 years of growth to recession, creates a different, and for many people a new context within which to lead and be led. Within professional services where the people are the product, and their capability to deliver impacts growth and development, the implications of this change in the environment needs to be addressed to limit any negative impact on performance. Recent research confirms that for leaders in professional services this means they are now under more scrutiny than ever before, often with a lack of knowledge and experience about how to deal with it. It also shows that the personal values that leaders hold impact how well they are able to meet the challenges and requirements being placed upon them.

CHALLENGES AND REQUIREMENTS FOR LEADERSHIP

The research was based upon interviews with leaders, people who are led by them and the coaches working alongside them. It

confirmed that the key challenges facing leaders may be defined as typical business challenges, addressing the internal needs to run a profitable organisation and keeping the people motivated whilst meeting the external needs of the clients. The scale of the challenge was evident in comments about times never being tougher and that with such uncertainty there are no predictions about what is to come.

Increased internal communication was confirmed to be a key requirement of leadership to address the challenges identified. From the leaders this means increasing face-to-face contact at both one-to-one and team level, for example visiting regional offices, keeping an open door and diarising five minute slots to be available for people. It also means communication in every sense of the word, delivering messages in an effective way both through the words and in the actions, as well as listening to and understanding what is being said within the organisation. In an uncertain environment it appears that leaders recognise they need to be accessible and the people who are led need this type of communication. This is especially true with some people experiencing a clear desk for the first time in their working lives and struggling to accept the challenge. Historically it was possible to motivate people through bonuses and in the absence of such external gain leaders need new ways to motivate them.

The theme of the responses from the people who are led reflects a need to be given boundaries which they understand and within which they can then be empow-

ered to work flexibly. This may be a call to be allowed to get on with what is necessary, accepting decisions when they come and a confidence that once there is clarity they will be able to deliver within it. This reflects comments from leaders who also face challenges of implementing decisions as they become more centralised, as opposed to making the decisions themselves.

VALUES AND LEADERSHIP

Rather than look at what leaders do to address these challenges and requirements, the research looked at what values would help leaders address them. Personal values and beliefs define the things that are important to people and are linked to behaviour and decision-making, it is through this link that they impact leadership. Emilliani (2003) states that "leaders' beliefs influence their behaviours and resulting competencies". The fundamental issue in reporting values is the subjective definition of each word, eg. Integrity may mean different things to different people based on their own beliefs and experiences. The commonality in the responses was that values relating to the inner self including authenticity, integrity, openness and honesty were mentioned from all perspectives. Differences exist in that the leaders were the only group to mention values around meaning and purpose and balance, and with the exception of one person who was led, the only group to raise them about delivery and achievement. This suggests that leaders have a set of values that run through from themselves, reflecting who they are, through how they connect with people reflecting how they do things and finally what they do in

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terms of delivery. Values such as determination, hard work and courage are no longer the focus for leaders though these must be present within them to allow them to have reached the positions they are in. The focus for the people who were led was all around the personal presentation of the leader, ie. that they came across as confident, optimistic, realistic and straightforward. This shows that what is important to them about leadership is having someone to look to and is in line with their need for reassurance and motivation.

Some leaders directly referred to the fact that they need their values now more than ever to navigate their way through such uncertain times. One suggested that those who had not developed an awareness of their values were like an automatic car with no capacity to move up and down the gears in response to the conditions and were struggling to cope. The difficulties leaders face with their values is how to apply them in changed circumstances. The term value 'elasticity' was used and refers to how far can they be flexed e.g. recognising the challenge of walking away from business because it compromises high standards which is harder in the current climate as there is nothing else in the pipeline. Meanwhile dealing with more personal and emotional issues and making choices between 'bad and less bad' is much harder now than the good times when as one leader put it, "anybody can lead".

Much of the development of the leaders'

values came through leadership development events, eg. through a business programme or a coaching relationship. Both of these activities created the opportunity for reflection. It is worth noting that for a leader who has not had such development the impact of the climate is to be "less fair, keep to self and focus on what gets measured".

In summary, the values required for leadership remain consistent in good and bad times. They are proving to be more helpful now than in the good times and are more evident as the leaders are now more on show than they have been before.

MOVING FORWARD

The change from working in a booming economy to one of recession renders many organisations and people ill equipped to face the current climate. With a lack of both knowledge and experience of how to cope, coupled with the uncertainty of how things will develop, leaders have to chart a new and difficult path. Much of what they know and have relied on in the past is no longer relevant.

The focus of attention in many organisations is corporate survival and the response for leadership according to one model of leadership development is authoritarian to address the need for control, (Barrett, 1998). Centralised control is not however how many people businesses have been used to operating. Programmes to develop talent management have put empowerment

and collaboration at the heart of the ways of working. The focus has been on creating the conditions to allow people to act and innovate, as leaders have moved up the hierarchy of leadership development. The impact of a shift towards authoritarianism, coupled with the focus on personal survival amidst redundancies would be to de-motivate and at worse create a paralysis amongst the people in the organisation as their critical and creative abilities become frozen (Goleman & Boyatzis 2008), (Gallwey, 2000, pg. 161). Research suggests that these are exactly the abilities required to exploit opportunities that will help deliver organisations successfully through the difficult times.

The challenge facing leaders today is how to address the corporate uncertainty and maintain the energy levels within the organisation to move forward. It is the leaders who have a set of goals and values around growth and development who are best placed to meet the requirements of the current climate. Corporate survival is balanced with higher goals; values around success and achievement are balanced with openness and authenticity.

The act of internal reflection required in identifying and prioritising values or what is important about leadership is beneficial. Having thought it through, in the face of uncertainty their own value set provides a leader with a platform upon which they can define who they are and why they are there (inner values), how they connect with others (connecting values) and what they do (outcome values). Such internal reflection enables them to create a vision around which they can inspire others to act and release the energy within the organisation.

In summary, the specific values required for leadership in the current climate are not different to those required in any other climate. The process of identification of values will define what is important to leaders and this will be evident in everything they say and do, so they become the reassuring, authentic, and inspiring role models their followers are looking for.

Ruth Simpson is a partner in the leadership coaching organisation Jericho Partners (www.jerichopartners.co.uk)

VALUE THEMES

Inner values

- 1 Focus on meaning
- 2 Focus on balance
- 3 Focus internally within self

Connecting values

- 4 Focus on relationships
- 5 Focus on how to deliver
- 6 Focus on personal presentation
- 7 Focus on ways of working
- 8 Focus on trust
- 9 Focus on approach

Outcome values

- 10 Focus around output/outcomes
- 11 Focus around clients

VALUES WITHIN THEME

- Meaning & fulfilment
- Family
- Honesty, openness, integrity, authenticity

- Respect, empathy, diversity, supportive, friendly, engaging, fun
- Learning & developing talent
- Confident, optimistic, realistic, straightforward
- Empowerment, collaboration, committed and loyal
- Trust, dependability, reliability, consistency
- Energy, creativity, flexibility & adaptability

- Success, deliver and achieve to high quality & ethical standards
- Client centric