

Follow the leader

Rodney Weidemann

There is a wide range of critical attributes that differentiates a leader from a boss.



Theodore Roosevelt once wrote that the fundamental difference between a leader and a boss is the fact that a leader leads, while a boss drives. In other words, while employees may have to listen to a boss, they will gladly follow a leader. Nonetheless, while it is clear that being a leader is necessary to get the best out of your subordinates, the qualities that make a real leader remain somewhat intangible.

One thing that is certain is that in the rapidly accelerating and changing world in which we live, with all its paradox, ambiguity, complexity and uncertainty, traditional leadership styles - particularly of command and control - are becoming increasingly suboptimal.

Therefore, determining what qualities are needed in a 21st century leader are more important than ever, particularly in a South African context. In this country, we have, unfortunately, witnessed many people assuming leadership roles in both the public and private sector where they have either been incapable of successfully expediting the role, or they have consciously chosen not to.

Qualities of an effective leader

Bryan Hattings, CEO of strategic talent management company Cycan, points out that leadership competency is obviously a key part of being effective in a business. However, since leadership can be very contextual, it makes it difficult to create standard

definitions or development approaches. Despite this, he says, there are certain core or foundational competencies that every good leader should have.

"These competencies include: the ability to create and articulate a compelling vision; the ability to manage paradox and ambiguity; reflection; self-awareness; decisiveness; creative listening; a coaching style of leadership, and an ability to view the collective, rather than simply the individual."

According to Titilayo Seriki, MD of Cielarko, a management consultancy for strategic organisational development, probably the single most important thing for a leader is to remember to be their own authentic self. Regardless of your competencies or others' perceptions of your leadership, ultimately you have to know your own style and be able to take into account both your own strengths and weaknesses, while also being able to recognise the needs of others.

"True leadership, after all, comes from your own internal attitude and self-knowledge - it's about a whole lot more than simply getting people to do what you want," she says.

"We have studied which leadership competencies are ideal for the unique traits of South African business and have identified six key abilities. These are: optimism; awareness of one's inner and outer realities; flexibility; integrity; caring for staff - without taking



responsibility away from them, and empathy, which is the ability to see the world from someone else's perspective and understand clearly where they are coming from."

Creating future leaders

Seriki suggests that when it comes to developing future leaders within the organisation, the first step is to develop their interpersonal effectiveness, in order to help make them more confident.

"We use a model called 'Functional Fluency', which provides us with a snapshot of their existing behaviours. This allows us to easily identify the areas where they are already effective, as well as those where they are not."

"This, in turn, enables us to develop a strategy to further strengthen the areas where they are effective and lessen their ineffective modes of behaviour. At the same time, everything we do here is aimed at feeding into developing the six key leadership functions mentioned above."

Hattingh adds that creating and developing future leaders via coaching and training is no longer merely a nice to have. Instead it has become a vital part of company strategy.

The importance of ethics

Ethics lie at the heart of any strong organisation. Whether it is a Fortune 500 company or an SME, studies have consistently found that ethical decision-making by leaders fosters employee morale, boosts brand reputation, encourages loyalty in customers and employees, and improves the bottom line. Leaders need to promote a culture of ethics, as this is what links those at the top with those below and beside them; ethics creates the connections which make the whole enterprise immeasurably stronger.

Ethical leaders direct and influence from a profound place of understanding principles, values, and the need for a clear acceptance of the role they play in enabling others to grow in their personal knowledge, self-worth and professional career. Those who seek to become such a leader need to be willing to examine their beliefs, thinking and goals honestly. Only once they are able to understand their personal strengths, weaknesses, behaviours and limitations can they commit to willingly helping others, by talking responsibility for the way in which their own actions affect other people.

“ The leaders of today and tomorrow, the ones who are going to stand out, will be the ones to create new economies and positively add value to the world, while continually pursuing greater levels of self-actualisation, purpose and meaning. While doing all of this, they will also be conscious and considerate of people who work with and for them, as well as the clients and community that they serve. ”

“The world has evolved to a place where transformational executive coaching is far beyond simply being a luxury for a select few. It has become a business imperative and potential game-changer for those companies that embrace it. It should, ultimately, be incorporated at the highest levels and across the various levels of leadership with appropriately structured and designed programmes, he explains.

Mentorship, continues Hattingh, is also important and has a real part to play, but a sustainable and revolutionary shift is only achievable through powerful coaching interventions. Here, the coach will be able to facilitate a reflective and relational journey at the deepest levels, incorporating the highest levels of purpose, meaning and belief.

“How these then contextually align with roles, portfolios and responsibilities is key to how the necessary behavioural changes are introduced and inculcated, in order to bring about the desired set of results and increased levels of engagement and accomplishment. If centred and modelled properly, they will also bring about increased levels of wellbeing, and a greater sense of fulfilment.”

A leadership journey

Seriki suggests that any good leader – and this holds across departments, industries and even countries - must have the ability to provide structure, nurture talent, and be empowering. They also need to be able to think logically and be aware of what is going on in the current situation, while always being capable of cooperating with other leaders and department heads. Above all else, she adds, they need to be able to express themselves and to be authentic.

“Perhaps the most crucial thing to remember is that leadership development is a journey that never stops. It is an ongoing process that you undergo for your entire leadership life.”

“If you shut yourself off from learning more, you will rapidly stagnate and no longer be a good leader. The journey is about constant, ongoing reflection within oneself, as well as always being prepared to learn from those you are leading. Remember that while you inevitably teach those you lead, you can - and you must - also be prepared to learn from them,” insists Seriki.

Ultimately, says Hattingh, it should be remembered that while what leaders communicate and the words they use are most certainly important, how they communicate is possibly even more so. And as leaders develop their skills further, they need to ensure the consistent exemplification of good practice, fair play and positive contributions.

“There is no doubt that while the good management of systems, processes, procedures, outputs, finances and resources is all essential to a successful business, the practice of this is not in itself contagious. On the other hand, energy, passion, conviction, commitment, decisiveness and compassion most certainly are, and these are attributes provided through strong and effective leadership.”

“The leaders of today and tomorrow, the ones who are going to stand out, will be the ones to create new economies and positively add value to the world, while continually pursuing greater levels of self-actualisation, purpose and meaning. While doing all of this, they will also be conscious and considerate of people who work with and for them, as well as the clients and community that they serve,” he states.

Or, as John Quincy Adams put it: “If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, then you are a leader.” ■