

Authentic Leadership Put to Test

In the good old days, say three years ago, it was easy to be an authentic leader – or so it seemed. Like the economy, the persona of leadership was easily masked through the smokescreen of bottom line performance figures. It was a lot easier ‘back then’ to be seen to adopt friendly workforce engagement practices and a host of fun things for employees to enjoy.

Now that the situation has changed so dramatically it is clear that the true leaders that have been able to retain their authenticity when put to the test! Indeed it might also be said that it is only in adversity, and once the cosmetics have been stripped away that the authentic leader will be clearly recognised.

If there is such a thing as inauthentic leadership, then this title may well be laid at the feet of those who got us in to this mess.

In the past year or so I have also met a number of business owners who have quietly come up to me after one of the MLN or Podiem events to say that in the ‘good times’ they thought their success was due to their leadership. Now they are finding in these tougher times that this good time leadership is being put to the test. The fact that these business owners have admitted (albeit quietly) that they do not have the experience to manage in more difficult times is fundamental to finding and building authentic leadership.

I’m mindful that the concept of authentic leadership in recent times has been pursued by Bill George, (amongst others) former CEO of Medtronic since the publication of his bestseller, True North. He has also set out seven lessons for leading in a crisis and as you will see there is a direct relationship between his first lesson and those quiet admissions. I have added some thoughts

- Face Reality, Starting with Yourself (but get others in the team to do the same)
- Get the World off Your Shoulders (others have to share the load and will have other ideas)
- Dig Deep for the Root Cause (Identify the real cause – it might be the family thing?)
- Get Ready for the Long Haul (no quick fix here)
- Never Waste a Good Crisis (Communicate the need for change – and make it)
- You’re in the Spotlight: Follow True North (Your people. Clients and customers are watching you)
- Go on Offense, Focus on Winning Now (Take decisive ‘thoughtful’ action)

I am always suspicious of the ‘steps to wonderment’ approach but I have to say that when I put these seven lessons (not steps) to the test they have helped to separate those leaders I see making wise and speedy decisions and those who are hoping that it all goes away. Of course these are not just actions - they are also rooted in values. The old notions of firm but fair, constancy of purpose, dealing with integrity might seem outdated but the reality is that it is these values that stand the test of time – over time.

We were recently involved with a local company that introduced employee recognition awards. There was some initial skepticism and reluctance to participate amongst hard core employees. However when the process came to its conclusion and the employees could see that there were no hidden agendas, no gimmicks, complete integrity in the process and outcomes along with senior management buy in the response was overwhelming. One middle manager for example, in an open e-mail apologised for his lack of support for the initiative and committed him and his team for the next year. A real success story for authenticity and a major win for the leadership team.

Authentic leadership is not new; it has been with us since people began to come together to hunt or fish. It has always been effective but it has always been difficult to achieve. It is easily lost especially in our postmodern ‘ego’ society. It is not always popular but always respected. It is not about being right but doing the right things – right. It can’t be taught but it can be developed.

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