

Leadership - Can we see the wood for the trees?

The many high profile leadership struggles over the past years - especially those based on elections – demonstrate that getting the right person for the job is exceptionally difficult.

Some years ago I heard Joel Barker, a leading business consultant and futurist describe his theory for the relentless phenomenon we call 'mediocrity'. It was such an obvious concept - yet many in the audience couldn't see it at first. Barker, who popularised the concept of the paradigm shift, based his premise on a 25-year eco-study of rainforests and drew the analogy from Mother Nature. His question was –'If a gap appears in the forest – what plants or trees take its place?' Answers came thick and fast including, 'the most competitive,' 'the most prolific,' 'the fittest' and 'the strongest'. Unmistakably, these answers reflect views that are rooted in traditional marketplace economics that is, the survival of the fittest.

Needless to say - they were all wrong. 'The reality', Barker said is, 'the one that is there and ready to go takes the place of the one that has gone'. The plant that grows may well be one that you don't actually want, but it is what you get.

The analogy was used to explain how we continue to get people in leadership positions just because they were there at a particular time. Think how many times you have said – 'how on earth did he/she get that job?'

Good management and leadership – like good husbandry - is having the foresight and the resources to be able to fill the gaps or better still, opportunities, with the right people. There are lessons here for us all, whether we are in a family firm, a large company, working in the community or hold a position in the world of politics.

For firms and corporations, the onus is on the existing leadership team to identify upcoming talent and nurture it. Additionally, organisations that have an elective process need to determine what future success will look like and cultivate leaders who will take them there.

Electing party leaders or governments is not so straightforward especially when so much diverse opinion exists about what the future should look like. It is hard to know whether people vote on the basis of what they don't want rather than on what they do want.

There is a heavy responsibility on those who are thrust into leadership positions and on those who choose to become leaders.

If you are interested in high office, you must define what good leadership looks like and be totally honest about how well you measure up to that. If you feel you have the raw talent, then take charge of your own development and gain the knowledge and experience required to do the job.

Leaders, like leadership, come in many shapes and sizes. In my experience, the only one characteristic that is not a variable is authenticity. Leaders don't have to be right all the time nor do they have to know everything about everything.

In fact, the most effective leaders I've met or worked with have developed a healthy balance between authority and humility. Being able to relate genuinely to people at every level, act with integrity and communicate with clarity are the enduring qualities that help leaders deliver.

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