

Leadership: Art or Act?

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Since the advent of 'Dolly' the Sheep, discussions about cloning keep grabbing our attention. Yet few realise that Presidents like Bush and Blair are proof that cloning has been going on for years. Evidently global leaders are being churned out of the same mould and the upshot is today we are facing a crisis of leadership.

Napoleon said that leaders are dealers in hope. Perhaps if he had stuck with this thought, his own fate may have been somewhat different! Certainly hope is not the language of world leaders. More likely they are well-schooled actors who toe the party line. On the business front, replace 'actors' with manipulators and 'the party' with self-interest and this statement could well reflect an accurate picture of leadership today.

I mean who really believes directors when they say people are a businesses most important asset? Especially when board meetings are held at expensive destinations but cost-cutting forces staff to buy their own milk for tea! It is no wonder that self-employment is the modern form of mutiny and - if big business is to survive – its leaders need to carefully scrutinise themselves.

In a hard-hitting article in *The Harvard Business Review*, peddlers of hope were asked the following question: "Who would want to be led by you anyway?" It is the kind of soul-searching question leaders could benefit from candidly answering on a daily basis.

Although much has been debated about the qualities of good leadership, the essence is simple; be real and inspire the best performance out of other people. In other words, arouse people with the hope of a better future and they are more likely to co-operate with your plans. Elementary it may sound, but many obstacles exist to achieving this in leadership today.

One of the biggest stumbling blocks is the latest trend in re-engineering. Of course keeping expenditure to a minimum must be a priority but at what cost? Sure many businesses carry dead wood but do retrenchments really solve the problem?

If the dead wood is as a result of poor leadership, cutting staff will only demotivate those who are alive and kicking. It makes them realise that a better future with you is merely a hollow promise. Hardly likely to motivate improved performance.

Another aspect of the current crisis is the education of leaders. Of course business managers need to learn about costing, production, budgeting and the like. But when the principles of 'units of production' are applied to people, academia runs into trouble. People respond badly to being treated as resources that can be pushed around.

In this regard, South African managers are known to be well read but - speak to their staff - and it becomes evident that few walk their talk. So the language of participation may be perfected but the message in the behaviour remains clear: My way or the highway! This is neither hope-filled nor inspiring.

As people respond predictably, autocratic behaviour can - at best - only produce reluctant compliance. Paradoxically this is exactly what managers tend to complain about most. Yet few leaders look to their own behaviour to understand what is generating this passive response.

In an informative work called *The Witchdoctors*, authors Micklethwait and Wooldridge claim 19 out of 20 USA managers feel inadequate in their jobs. It largely explains why many leaders find it so difficult to be authentic. After all, how can one be real when feeling so insecure?

It also reveals why much management behaviour manifests as bravado and arrogant power games. From psychology it is known that poor levels of self-confidence are often covered up by arrogance. It provides an impenetrable shell to hide one's inadequacies behind. As such, it also makes people extremely self-involved. So it is no wonder that arrogant leaders ultimately fail.

Yet instead of working through the painful process of gaining self-confidence, managers tend to escape into their intellect. Again, education supports this by providing more and more theories. These may be intellectually interesting but often have little to do with how humans really behave.

When it comes to people, trust is the glue that binds relationships and the success of a team is based on the strength of these relationships. Break this trust and do not expect that people will again put their lives in your hands. Just because you pay them, it does not mean they are robbed of choices.

Every day people make decisions - often subconsciously - whether they are going to support or sabotage their leaders. Their decision is based on the nature of the leader's relationship with them. If they do not like you, don't expect co-operation. This is the essence of being emotionally intelligent.

However, it is not to say that emotional intelligence (EQ) is about being 'nice'. On the contrary; sometimes it requires being tough, at others it may require a bit of charm but mostly it is about being yourself. Here an essential component for success is that leaders are in control of their own moods and irritations. It is not surprising then that emotional maturity is the foundation of powerful leadership.

This is important because the truth is most people feel desperately insecure. Just scratch the veneer of confidence and many fall apart. It is why I often say, if leaders cannot re-arrange the thunderous look on their face, they would do well to stay in bed for the day. At least there they can do less harm than inflicting themselves on their staff in the office.

Also by definition leadership requires knowing where you are going. Certainly in my experience of executive training I have seen how few have a clear idea of where they are heading.

There is a revealing training exercise that shows the futility of this. Here delegates are taken a hundred metres or so from the familiar. They are blindfolded and instructed to get back to their seats in the room. Mostly the noisiest initially emerge as leaders until, of course, they run the group into trouble. Then, those who know where they are going take over. But the team only gets back if the leader is supportive, informative and listens carefully to team members. It is powerful because only the basics of people management make the task successful.

So today the question must be asked: Is leadership an art or an act? If you are unsure about your own role, simply ask yourself how well you are able to gain other's co-operation? Here very few leaders realise they can only be successful if each team member achieves. This requires meeting staff needs and creating an enabling environment for them to fulfil their hope of creating a better future for themselves. Anything less and your act will have failed the art of leadership.

Stephanie Vermeulen of *The Effective Training Corporation* runs practical training programmes on Applied EQ in both business and public forums as well as being an inspiring conference speaker and personal coach.

Her books, *Stitched-up: Who Fashions Women's Lives?* and *EQ: Emotional Intelligence for Everyone* are available from all leading bookstores and online from Amazon and Kalahari. She can be contacted on:

Phone: +27 11 486 1211

e-mail: steph@theeqsite.co.za

website: www.theeqsite.co.za