



Leadership: The Hard and the Soft

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Recently I was privileged to facilitate a number of discussions at the annual CEO Summit in early September 2008, a key event hosted and arranged by Dictum Publishing. Each year a number of senior leaders are invited and given various pertinent topics to discuss and reflect on. One of the topics had leaders reflecting on the barrage of paradoxes and contradictions that they face daily in this ever increasingly complicated world that we live in. I will use certain of the discussions to form the basis for this article.

The long versus the short

Businesses continually find themselves being pressured for short term results yet many of the factors that influence these results require a longer-term focus. The lower levels of every organisation are closest to the customers and the products and therefore have a key influence on profits. Factors that enable people, often seen as “soft factors” such as the organisational culture, communication, leadership styles, involvement, communication, change management, trust, congruence and vision therefore have a profound impact on profit. Considering the radical changes around us that we need to cope with daily such as record high inflation rates, increasing world debt, global sustainability, unrest, increasing population rates, increasing poverty, government uncertainty etc. etc., it can be very challenging to keep one’s eye on the long-term game while delivering in the short term. We need to still minimise risk while encouraging entrepreneurship, deliver to strict timelines while maintaining a work-life balance, and look after and care for people while remaining lean and often right sizing, these are just a few of our challenges.

Talent

South Africa is currently experiencing a huge talent shortage, figures published show that the IT sector alone is short some 70 000 individuals at the moment. Businesses now more than ever need to look at how they retain, treat and develop talent. On the retention side, it is said

that employees leave organisations for bad managers and that the organisational culture reflects the personality of the top leadership. This shows the need for a value system within the organisation that is lived at all levels, a system where people feel they are treated with dignity, respect and transparency. Leadership needs to be unleashed at all levels; people need to feel they are the Managing Directors of their positions. This is easier said than done, as top leadership sets the tone of the business and needs to model the values and behaviours that the business wishes to aspire to. This is not always so easy considering increasing daily pressures and challenges.

South Africa's talent shortage is related to our rapid growth as well as to many of the practices that suppressed people under the apartheid regime. As businesses we need to think differently to reduce our talent shortages. We cannot abdicate the responsibility to government to solve our talent crisis, the problem is just too large. Businesses need to also take up responsibility and leadership in this area. Businesses need to consider ways to employ people with the right aptitudes and attitudes and then through learnerships and other practices help skill up these people, which is a big commitment from the organisational side. But what if these newly skilled people then find a better job? We need to think abundantly, if some of these people do indeed leave, then aren't you helping the country to solve both skills and employment issues? If every company did this, we would have come a long way towards solving many of our unemployment challenges.

Broadening scope of senior leadership

The scope of the role facing senior leadership seems to be broadening, organisations are increasingly being affected by national and even global issues such as environmental sustainability, poverty and unemployment, political stability, national talent shortages and energy issues to name a few. Today more than ever, organisational leadership is required to step beyond the traditional limits of their organisations and start dialogue with other organisations, industry bodies and government to help develop solutions to these challenges together.

At the same time, constant crisis and talent shortages pull senior leadership down to doing shorter term technical tasks, compressing the staff at lower levels and often creating vacuums of longer term work that is often being neglected, therefore increasing risk to the organisation.

Key skills for leadership today

The team I facilitated at the CEO Summit then came up with a number of skills, behaviours and attributes that they felt were vital to successfully managing an organisation today:

1. Leaders must be able to master the ability to reflect as well as introspect even in times of crisis.
2. The ability to tap into the views and perspectives of people that you trust.
3. You need to always consult and reflect before making decisions, but then you need to make the right call. You need to have the ability to make the right call without being influenced by your personal ego.
4. You need to find ways that work for you to consistently apply values. You need to think through the big picture on the backdrop of well defined morals and values.
5. You need to develop a statesperson approach to building networks and creating conversations across industries and sectors, don't wait for others, you must lead the way.

Being a leader of organisations and people is indeed a complex task, which in itself is a challenge that we face today. We know that leaders are not born but made, yet most of the attributes and skills of a good leader can only be learnt over time through experience, trial and error. Companies today need to pay urgent attention to creating opportunities for people to learn how to lead themselves and others.

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