Leadership: Hope and Optimism

Paul de Beer

Happy New Year, we all hope 2018 will be a year filled with many new opportunities and better growth for South Africa and its people. We have already had one very positive change as a country, we hope for many more. The global markets are looking very strong, much better than economists had thought, and this should positively impact South Africa should we address the right issues as a country. People are feeling optimistic!

I think its very important for all of us to step into the new year with a note of optimism and hope. When we are filled with positive energy we better engage and bring our full selves into all that we do. Successful organisations are made up of highly engaged staff, hence there is clearly a role for organisational leaders to invigorate people with hope.

So how can you step into the new year and help your organisation to "light up" and be better equipped to create its own successful future? It is important to consider that according to the Gallup Consortium's 2013 global workplace report, only 9% of South African staff are fully engaged. On the flip side, 45% of staff are actively disengaged.   These numbers are far worse than the world average, but also show that we have a huge opportunity to create workplaces that get more people engaged.

According to Gallup's statistics, three things enable engaged people: feeling respected, a sense of personal development and positive relationships. These three have everything to do with the organisations culture, the style of leadership used, the way strategy is created and executed, performance management and people development to name a few.

1. **Strategy**

Consider that strategy consists of long-term positioning and short-term actions, and that the right execution is core to any successful strategy. Generally, the higher levels of organisations are responsible for the longer-term goals and these should cascade down to every level and staff member and to each action taken day to day. The general rule is that if you want someone to own their work and fully engage, then include them in some way in the determination of the strategy that they must execute on. Methods that can greatly assist, is to create an organisational purpose, along with a vision and values. A purpose is of a higher order than a vision and should clearly and emotively spell out **why** the business exists. This purpose should then be cascaded down to every division, department and function. Look at the following article and videos for further details:

a) Building an Organization that is Fit to Execute Strategy,: *http://www.evolveleadershipconsulting.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Article-Building-an-Organisation-that-is-Fit-for-Execution.pdf*

b) Start with Why, Simon Sinek: https://youtu.be/IPYeCltXpxw

c) Southwest Airlines, Our Purpose and Vision: https://youtu.be/eGxMf88I5g4

2. **Style of Leadership and Culture**

I like to think of culture as the road to success. Without a road you cannot drive anywhere. Organisational culture simply put is "*the way we do things around here*". Many things influence the culture: present and past leadership, the places staff come from, positive and negative organisational events, process and practices, the competitive landscape and many more. Think about the positive and negative ways people behave within your organisation. Do you experience the same behaviors regularly, write them down? This is your culture, and one must ask if this culture will help your organisation to thrive in the long term or not? One of the roles of senior leadership is to help define, set and ensure the organisation has the desired culture.

In the hierarchical and authority centric world that almost lies behind us, management would mostly use a parent-child style of leadership, and then they would wonder why staff disengaged and would not take accountability (acting like children). This world demands an adult-adult style of leadership, which means interacting with all staff equally as adults irrespective of their level. As per Gallup's survey quoted above, people must be treated in a way that makes them feel respected, this is as adults, not children.

3. Cascaded Goals

Once a business has decided on its critical success factors through its strategic process, it ideally then defines its strategic objectives. The objectives are worded as an end state such as "grow revenue by 10% in market 1 and 2" or "reduce operational costs by 10% in real terms". Both these strategic objectives will require a plan of actions (a strategy) to achieve these end states. In both cases, these plans would cascade to every department and every person in some way. This link is key. Motivation levels will be high, If each person has bought into the Purpose, Vision and Strategy and has a clear view of how their work relates to the bigger picture. People are motivated by meaning, achievement and purpose. See the following article for more strategy insights:

Building an Organization that is Fit to Execute Strategy, Paul de Beer:

http://www.evolveleadershipconsulting.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Article-Building-an-Organisation-that-is-Fit-for-Execution.pdf

4. Performance Management

The entire field of performance management is still disputed in many areas. What is understood is that people work for meaning and want fairness and transparency. One of the key failures of performance management in many organisations is that it is not consistent and fair. Ratings are often biased to push most people into the center of the bell curve and flag them as average performers.

The ideal performance management system should be linked to the individual and team cascaded goals as described above, as well as link to the desired cultural behavioral drivers. There should be clear differentiation between good and poor performance. If the person is a people manager, then it is key to performance manage their role as a manager. Make sure to train all your managers on how to conduct meaningful performance conversations.

5. Customer Centricity

Customer centricity as the name implies, means putting the customers needs in the center. This requires an organisation to be good at the transactional drivers (technology, processes, product, quality, efficiency etc.) as well as the transformational drivers (long term thinking, EQ, engagement, listening, etc.). The prerequisite for your staff to powerfully engage with your customers is for them to be fully engaged within your organisation. Ideally in the long run, all organisations should develop their culture to fully support customer centricity.

Here is a short article with a few additional perspectives: ***Leadership, the Hard and the soft.***

http://www.evolveleadershipconsulting.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Article_Leadership_The-Hard-and-the-Soft.pdf

6. Skills and Talent

The right people with the right skills at every level is key.   When I talk about skills, I am referring to both the technical skills as well as the transformational skills. Transformational is about a more longer-term focus and includes the so called soft skills.   It is quite common to see brilliant technocrats promoted to more senior roles, but then end up micromanaging everything as they simply aren't competent with these longer-term more abstract skills. These people often end up derailing or being fired, which is not good for them or their organisations.   Every organisation should therefore have a proper talent management process to help people achieve their potential and support continuous growth. As per Gallup's three engagement factors mentioned above, a sense of personal development can only be leveraged by helping staff to grow.

7. Positive Psychology

The field of positive psychology has been linked directly to leadership and culture as well as high performing teams and organisations.   Martin Seligman is his book called "*Flourish",* found that High Performing or flourishing organisations always were able to look for the positive / opportunities versus negativities in a ratio above 2.9 to 1. Struggling organisations were always more negatively focused. Many organisational leaders today, based on their behaviors still believe that fear is the best motivator for people. This is clearly not the case.   The truth is important, but try to point out what's working and what was achieved rather than mostly focusing on problems and failures.   Good leaders learn to reframe situations, and distil what the achievements really were as opposed to fixating on what's broken.   As an example, we could easily say that 2017 was a shocking year for South Africans. However, I believe the tough year helped us grow as follows:

- We are becoming clearer as a nation regarding what we want from our leaders.   Inclusivity, transparency and participation are values people want to experience, we want our leaders to walk the talk and do what they say they will do.
- More and more people are speaking up as well as getting involved in group leadership activities.   This is key for South Africa's future, leadership is about doing something rather than sitting in the shadows.
- Slowly, very slowly, people are starting to gain commonalities and share perspectives despite all the various elements of our diversity.

- Wrong doings always seem to be found out in the end. Bad news cannot remain hidden. I think this is good news, as we can now deal with the things that are damaging our country.

- People are becoming more aware of climate change and its possible impact. (especially in Cape Town) We are starting to use natural resources more sparingly and are generally against non-sustainable practices (nuclear, coal etc.)

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