

# Leading change

*Change can often be initiated by dominant and selfish methods simply deflecting attention from leaders lacking an inner confidence. Rob Hallam suggests that there are alternative approaches which are closer to the Christian way of behaviour. Drawing on scriptural references, he recounts a poignant example at which he was present, where responsible leadership embarked on change through honesty and vulnerability.*

Recently in one of our monthly Faith in Business discussions we were musing over the challenges leaders face – such as where and how is it possible to show compassion, and even develop relationships with employees who so often sit on the stark receiving end of change?

Perhaps unsurprisingly the wisdom of Solomon eluded us. A definitive answer did not bubble to the surface. But the challenge justifies further exploration as so much is to be gained from even the smallest advance in delivering change positively.

Over more years than I care to count I have both enjoyed, observed and been immensely challenged by the responsibility of leading change. At its lowest ebb I have witnessed it savaging morale and accelerating division. At its highest peak, it has created a new platform for united ambition and belief. The absence or centrality of trust has often been the defining factor in leading change.

## Alternative Approaches

I bear witness to the many privileges and depth of fulfilment to be enjoyed with the responsibility of leadership – none more so for me than when I came to Cambridge to lead the centrepiece store in the new Grand Arcade. But strong leadership inherently requires the capability to lead through change. Invariably this challenge makes even the most confident leader nervous. Perhaps it's because it draws leaders and those they lead into unfamiliar closer communication; maybe it's the discomfort of leadership credentials facing deep scrutiny; or is it simply the realisation that some change may genuinely impact lives in an adverse way? In autocratic countries and organisations such elements would perhaps not cause a murmur of conscience. But for many Christian leaders working in a community-centred society, the weight of responsibility for ensuring that change lands to optimal effect can feel

immobilising and poses a real risk of conflicting values.

However, we should not fail to see the opportunity that can be brought by personal investment in delivering change well. In these tense moments volunteers or employees may readily embark upon a forensic exploration of their leaders. They are intrigued to see what characteristics will prevail. Will they see leaders seeking to show their power and control credentials, being most concerned with how they may appear to their own bosses? After all, an approach to get something through swiftly, suppress noise, and manipulate a compliant group of subordinates may be considered a badge of honour for any forthcoming career-ladder competition.

It is not illogical to expect opposition to change, therefore it is easy to see why a dominating leadership style may appeal. Fighting subordinate power with a demonstration of seniority, higher cognitive skills and judicious



Grand Arcade, Cambridge  
photo: Joe Giddens/PA Wire

positioning of facts that favour the leader's argument is a route all too frequently taken, even if this happens at a subconscious level.

Other leaders may soften the truth or carefully deflect their responsibility for team leadership. Ill-informed or insecure middle management may be particularly susceptible and choose to preface change announcements with "the business has decided, and I am simply here to tell you" or worse still "it's not the decision I would have made but...", How can such an approach expect to realise support when employees and their leader emerge side by side in the new world? Proverbs 29:14 brings out this reality so simply: 'If a king judges the poor with fairness, his throne will be established forever'. How short-sighted must one be to fail to realise that future discretionary effort is to be earned and is intrinsically linked to the bond and respect that teams have with those that lead them?

So what choices can they make in fully embracing their responsibilities?

One choice may pivot on recognising that when facing seismic change, employees often have a unique opportunity to peel back the layers of hierarchical protection that leaders may routinely rely on. When this happens personal traits will be revealed. Do leaders fundamentally grasp that both their overt and perceived characteristics will define the imminent transition process and the journey that follows?

## Leadership Vulnerability

As Christians we are clearly guided not to discard our responsibility for compassion and humility as we lead. 'Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away' (1 Peter 5:2-4 NIV). But it's not always easy. Working as I did in an organisation renowned for its integrity, honourable values were indeed a personal blessing. Yet with that rich legacy came a burden. Every leadership interaction, especially at a crossroads of change, had the potential to undermine the trust credentials generations had so selflessly built up. Conversely, it could reinforce values so deeply, that no ebb and flow of commercial fortunes could de-stabilise the collective unity. Each leadership interaction shaped the journey. I can recall too many interactions where I wish I had the opportunity to go back and revisit the approaches that I took, but I also reflect with pride on those moments where the courage of vulnerability reaped reward beyond my comprehension. Leadership vulnerability, rather than power, shaped a bond of trust which was never shaken – a bond to which I can still trace successes, some coming years later.

I remember one such day very clearly. The business had convened a meeting of its elected voice, employees from every corner of the organisation. They were to hear about plans for seismic change. The impact of the planned change would remove hundreds of roles and require adjustments to many others. The mood was sombre. I was always intrigued to see how things would go. The content was invariably predictable: background, followed by options, leading to proposed change and a shortened summary of impact. Discussion would then follow. The defining moment was unlikely to emerge from content; the outcome would however be fundamentally orchestrated by the tone, the personality and transparency of the leader's innermost feeling.

Unexpectedly the meeting opened without crafted slides to woo the audience but with a genuinely captivating example of vulnerability from a senior director. It lacked extraordinary confidence, power words, deliberate pace; it was script-less, yet carefully considered. You could have heard a pin drop as the director spoke of the enormity of responsibility to protect generations of legacy. I sensed the employee audience could almost feel the director's pulse racing as they recounted the diligent analysis and subsequent meetings which led to the realisation that maintaining the current status quo (no matter how well it was executed) and adopting nominal actions would simply not allow the business to



### Vulnerability In Leadership

Photo: Dublin Business School



**Sometimes the longer game dictates less aggressive plays**

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compete effectively. Opening a window to how this dark place really felt to senior leaders was both compelling and emotional. Very quickly a clear sense emerged - that the less heart-wrenching decision for leadership to bring to their employees would have been to sidestep the tough choices, excuse away trading shortcomings, mask honesty and reality, and keep teams happy in blissful ignorance of the forthcoming storm, corporate and personal impact. I pictured leaders of less integrity and less allegiance to the deeper purpose, ducking responsibility to navigate these defining moments. Others would perhaps choose to exploit convenient personal exit options, placing highly tempting paths for themselves, ahead of leading those they had committed to serve.

But here, the transparency, humility, vulnerability, and genuine discomfort effectively re-set the predicted adversarial tone. I had just seen a beautiful enactment of direction and encouragement offered by Paul to Titus 'In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have

nothing bad to say about us' (Titus 2:7-8, NIV). If any of those attending had come for a fight, they powerfully and collectively saw that the battle for their well-being and protection from adverse impact had already been fought. The scars were audible in the leadership's words and visible on the faces of the boardroom elite. Compassion, so often a sentiment assumed to be extracted at birth from senior leadership, had been fundamentally central to the decision for change. The decision of course had commercial dynamics, but care and compassion were unequivocally evident in the truth and vulnerability standing before them. Bold change was the greatest protection for the workforce that leadership could offer.

A rare achievement was palpable. In responsibly shouldering corporate decision-making, the leader had clearly walked many agonising miles in the shoes of the soon-to-be-affected employees<sup>1</sup>. In that moment, the employees were having an unparalleled and unguarded insight in how it felt to be the decision-makers, choosing honest pain today over inevitable and greater pain tomorrow. I suspect neither the leaders nor the led would have voluntarily traded places. Bridging across all hierarchies, mutual respect filled the room.

Any lingering mood of aggression associated with the imminent change, softened in an instant: here was their leader who had already explored and agonised over every permutation. Now was not the time to choose to heap more pain on those already scarred. The leader had shown readiness to carry responsibility for sustaining the great legacy. The burden ahead for leadership was equivalent, potentially even greater, than the burden on those receiving the information who were being asked to accept and support the inevitable consequences of bold change.

Leading teams in uncertain times is daunting<sup>2</sup>. It can feel such a lonely place. And yes, sadly, when facing the strain of delivering change, aggressive career progression has programmed some to avoid showing a glimpse of vulnerability or emotion at all cost. Ironically, those genuine characteristics, accompanied with sound context, can be the most compelling source of unity and trust for the chapter that lies ahead<sup>3</sup>. Leaders of integrity, anchored in honesty, unfazed by exhibiting controlled emotion may find that the moments which many peers fear are their celebrated and most defining opportunities. 

1. 1 Corinthians 10:33 '...even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved' We are called to place the needs of the many first. Solutions cannot and will not please everyone; our diligence would be undermined by this. but let us be realistic'. See also Proverbs 27:23 'Be diligent to know the state of your flocks, and attend to your herd'. How can we make decisions as leaders without a close understanding of those we lead?  
 2. Proverbs 24:10 'If you falter in a time of trouble, how small is your strength!' Leading is a calling that requires perseverance and strength.  
 3. Psalm 133:1 'Behold how good and how pleased it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.' A responsibility of leadership is to unite.



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