

Managing Change: The Leadership Challenge

Rialto Associate Director, Dr John Potter shares insights into 6 key areas where leaders need to be more effective and how to develop successful leaders at all levels. Having the right capabilities will enable leaders to meet the demands of the new world... full of turbulent times!

The need for effective leadership at all levels in our organisations has never been greater.

The increasing levels of regulation, litigation risk, morale and stress problems within many workplaces, public suspicion about the motives of many large corporate bodies, increasing complexity and the accelerating rate of change all conspire to make greater demands on organisational leaders than ever before.

Leaders need to deal with an extensive range of problems. They range from crises which need focused direction to system and management problems where the leader has to bring the enhanced thinking and appropriate resources to bear on the problem.

Then there are those complex 'wicked' problems which have no single right answer but require a decision to be made on which key stakeholders takes precedence in whatever problem solving approach is taken.

Over the years we have seen leadership thinking evolve through the qualities, situational, behavioural and functional approaches to a state where we now have a relatively clear idea of the capabilities a leader needs to possess to be effective in whatever job role they engage.

“We can identify six key areas where leaders need to be effective”

Those capabilities depend partly on the level of leadership at which the individual is operating. Strategic leaders need specific skills to cope with 'big picture strategic issues'.

Operational leaders need to be able to create an effective operational environment where strategy is turned into daily practices and front line leaders, particularly those dealing with customers, need to have the mindset of an 'owner' rather than an employee.

Whatever the level of the individual leader it seems that we can identify six key areas where leaders need to be more effective particularly if they want to be sustainable in their positions and work in a diverse and multi-cultural setting:

1. The leader needs to be someone who develops capability on the part of the organisation both in terms of business performance and in unlocking the potential of its people.
2. They need to be able to handle greater complexity and the issues already referred to at the start of this article.
3. Leaders need to be visible and to connect with others, both inside their organisation with front line people and externally with other organisations. Business networking both internally and externally is becoming a key success factor for all business leaders.
4. Leaders need to be aware of and understand other cultures, particularly in a multi-cultural society and in dealing with customers from other countries.

5. Leaders need truly to understand the context in which they and their business is operating.
6. They must be publicly committed to working to a set of shared values.

So how do we develop effective leaders at all levels in our organisation and create a leadership pipeline of future leaders to ensure that our organisation is sustainable and can grow to meet the demands of the new world in terms of its capability?

Over the past century we have seen many approaches to leadership development ranging from arduous physical training to produce leadership confidence and resilience such as is still used by the military.

At the other end of the spectrum we have the academic approach which tends to focus on developing an understanding of a range of leadership models, some of which are more useful and practical than others.

We can sum up leadership development by saying there is no single right way that fits all situations and organisations. However there are some themes upon which Learning and Development people can capitalise.

After some thirty years involved with 'hands on' leadership development in a wide range of settings it seems that a picture is emerging that leadership is developed through the following practical experience:

- Observation of effective leaders in real situations.
- Understanding a range of leadership models.
- Introspection and reflection on the outcomes of personal leadership activity.
- Identification of effective leadership role models and leadership 'heroes'.

This is a powerful mix and one where the balance can be adjusted to suit the organisation and its business objectives.

In general terms leaders need to engage with their people, have visibility, set clear direction and persevere intelligently with the strategic course on which they embark. Communicate effectively, keep promises and be open and honest in their dealings particularly with their own people if they are to build trust.

Above all a leader needs to build a collective sense of purpose in their whole organisation. Effective change leadership is perhaps one of the most challenging areas that leaders have to address.

To do this effectively it is important to gain an accurate perception of the present position, formulate a shared vision and accompanying set of values and then craft a strategy to take the organisation and its people from its present state to where it wants to go, particularly in terms of accelerated business performance.

Rialto has pulled together many approaches to deliver effective change leadership within organisations to produce win-win results for all concerned. The approach is called Transforming the Performance Culture.

TPC is a highly effective strategic solution which when twinned with effective executive leadership development brings a number of benefits to the organisation:

- Aligns employees.
- Fosters innovation.
- Creates a step change in performance.
- Wins with customers and leaves competitors in the slow lane.

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