CORPORATEWISDOM

21st century leadership? 'Twas ever thus.

There's a lot of writing about 21st century leaders and what new characteristics or traits are needed in an age where we have digital disruption, machines running more and more of our lives, a faster pace of living and leading, and transparency like never before. So I've been thinking about the idea that is circulating, that a new kind of leader is needed. And I think the idea is incomplete.

I've been thinking about this in two ways. First, what are the enduring elements of good leaders, things that don't change from decade to decade?

Leaders need to get things done in their businesses as they always have – to create the conditions for sustainability through performance and growth. They need the intellect and objectivity to understand their business and how it fits together and delivers financial performance. They need the curiosity and insight to understand their industry and the trends and forces underpinning it, now and in the future. And that now includes disruption from parallel industries that weren't in the picture before. They need to be good prioritisers and decision-makers. And there is the eternal need to form trusting relationships, caring for those around them who help them deliver results. And underpinning the relationships aspect is how that care is evidenced, through interpersonal awareness, mentoring, encouraging team play, collaboration and being totally present in a heart-felt way, with people. You can be great at all the other things, but if you're low on the relationship factor, you'll likely fail.

So if these are the sorts of things great leaders have always evidenced, what is new? And what are the contemporary demands on leaders that require new capabilities? I think the answer is that there are not new capabilities needed. Instead, it is about dialling up some of the eternal elements of leadership in these fast paced and transparent times.

One of the key demands of leadership today is to be adaptable and yet able to stay on course in the midst of disruption, turbulence and transparency. What does that mean? It means being curious enough about new developments and trends, being able to see how they fit with your business, and yet not be unduly distracted by the shiny and new. Leaders always needed to be curious, but it's more important now, particularly in industries facing high levels of disruption. And the objectivity needed along with this curiosity, is needed more than ever in the assessment of opportunities.

It also means being able to quickly integrate perceived personal and professional challenges and move on with certainty, secure in the knowledge that true provision of service will outlast market fluctuations and opinions. Leaders need an enhanced ability to work with their perceptions of a situation or event and steer a balanced course through that, rather than being distracted by one side or another. That is integration, and it was always needed, yet it is needed at greater speeds now, as new opportunities and challenges occur more rapidly and with greater transparency.

And the thread that runs through the aspects of leadership that need dialling up is conscious awareness. As Otto Scharmer has said, "the quality of results produced by any system depends on the quality of awareness from which people in the system operate…form follows consciousness". The best leaders I know are intent on continuing to learn, both personally and on a business level. They recognise that unless they can get past their own baggage, they won't fully lead others. And they distinguish daily between consciously creating something, and reactivity. Twas ever thus.

Level 6, 38 Macleay Street Potts Point NSW 2011 Sydney Australia
PO Box 1278 Potts Point NSW 2011
Telephone: +61 2 9332 2800 | Facsimile: +61 2 9966 4141
Email: bw@corporatewisdom.com | www.corporatewisdom.com | Lymvat Pty Ltd | ABN 79711726023