

Integrity is the best shield for tough jobs

Debbie Nicol

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Your boss says: “Congratulations.” He adds: “You are the winner of the ‘special project’.”

It’s a new and special assignment – one the board could not trust with many, and you are “the best person for the job”. He assures you it is not going to be easy, and that his full support will be never-ending. Furthermore, insights from the board point to possible wrongdoing, unfair play and collusion to “influence” the required investment decision. Due to this a neutral report on the reality of the situation is required. Funding is tight so external consultants are out, and you have been chosen to investigate impartially, and make recommendations.

Creating change is certainly part of a leader’s role. Yet when creating change in an environment containing adverse conditions, such as the need for possible exposure of malpractice, what can any leader do to preserve their own integrity? And what can be done to foster resilience in the face of adversity and come out unscathed?

Toxicity will always abound in such situations, often camouflaged with unrealistic expectations, favouritism, financial quirks, and even covert or overt bullying with forces coming at the leader. A successful leader will ensure they do not become drained or negatively influenced by these factors. Techniques to ensure leaders keep themselves on track through this period can include:

Deflect and reflect

During the process of data collection, there will a great deal of information through channels, some of it fact and some of it “influential fiction” from those with hidden agendas. Just as rays of sunshine are deflected when striking a mirror, so too must a leader in this situation filter what is allowed “in” and what must be deflected. This is achieved primarily with an evidence-based approach – what meets the criteria and what does not.

Be resilient

Many will not be happy that you are at the centre of a decision which they may seek to influence. After all, aren’t you supposed to be a colleague and friend? Yet this is corporate life, reality and a great opportunity to test strength of leadership. When a proactive primary sponsor shares the reasons why you were selected for this role, they must highlight the importance of your unique levels of resilience in adversity. This important message will imply an ability that allows you to cope with any opinions, remarks and spite, yet not be tarred by them. When the heat is on during such a project, it must be clear that the leader’s integrity shields him or her from influence.

Keep your head down

It can be all too easy to be sucked into emotional whirlpools unwittingly. During highly-sensitive change projects, it can be unwise to engage in social

gatherings and informal meetings; the project itself can claim your time and act as the reason for non-attendance.

Ensure the finished report is presented in a coherent manner, the facts should be clear, unencumbered and easy to find. In this way, the resulting report does the hard work, providing the justification for any recommendation provided.

The key to survival with such a “tightrope” assignment, one that requires you to walk a very fine line, is to ensure the report’s content and you remain separated. There will be a time after the project when the leader will be back to being “one of the team” and hence cannot afford to lose the respect and trust of peers. Issues are unable to be misconstrued when compartmentalised, and the person gathering data does not belong in that same compartment. Work hard at this, show evidence of impartiality, send sensitive negative information in language of undisputable fact, and stand back to observe success. The dubious honour of being awarded that project has now painted a picture of you as a principled leader – one who can both survive and thrive under adverse, sensitive and critical conditions and emerge untainted. Congratulations – those leaders are few and far between.

Debbie Nicol, the managing director of Dubai-based business en motion, is a consultant on leadership and organisational development, strategic change and corporate culture.

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