

Cast a cold eye on the self to lead well

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Leadership programmes, leadership development, masterclasses, assessments and action plans are all a part of today's crowded corporate landscape in some shape or form. The modes of delivery, the theory behind them and even the leadership content itself may differ but they all aim to achieve the same purpose. I once worked with a midlevel manager who was on the fast-track to executive leadership after a performance review identified some real promise in his early years. The process put Joe (we'll call him that for this column) through a typical 'filter' that showed him as being a 'high potential' for leadership ability. He was given the opportunity to take on more responsibility, but six months into the new position, which brought with it a significant increase in accountability, cracks started to be evident in his facade. Team morale plummeted and turnover increased.

Diminishing returns in leadership

Joe was indeed achieving targets and goals, yet at what cost? Questions simmered whether he would be able to sustain these results with an ever-dwindling team and very little support. There was an insatiable appetite for more recognition from others and hence drove the need for more push, more resources, more speed; unwittingly also more mixed priorities.

Turning attention inwards

This 'more of everything' attitude was affecting his team, leading them along a destructive path into a downwards spiral. It was time to change the focus from more external recognition, resources, effort and speed to more focus on alignment and priorities within Joe. It was time for Joe to accept that the results would not continue if he could not bring out the best in the team.

The role model

At the same time and in another organisation, I also worked with Josephine, a young leader who also was spotted by a talent mechanism, was also seen as a high-potential candidate and was now fully accountable for her own department. Josephine's department was going through massive change and hence emotional turmoil. Josephine realised that this needed to be addressed, that the team were not a mechanical machine to be switched on and off.

Reflecting and connecting

Josephine turned her focus to herself and what she wanted from her own leaders. She knew she wanted connection, direction and alignment with what matters most. The alignment with her own leaders motivated her to do what it took to get required results.

(a) She explored the relationship with herself, strengthening her resilience to

help her to cope with pressure. She turned the mirror back on herself – monitored the quantity of sleep and reconnected her actions to her purpose.

(b) She worked with relationships that were ‘high in need’. She was on the lookout for those vital signs of misalignment – toxic communication, arguments and conflict, push backs and silent indicators of resistance. In other words, Josephine worked on the inside first, the team’s needs next and finally the technical sides such as resources and targets.

The essential component – to know where to begin

What will ensure that leadership programmes do produce more of Josephine and less of Joe? Do not start with content or methodology or technique or action planning. Start with the self; after all when a leader identifies himself to be in a good space, clarity will exist and confidence can serve. This phase will help a leader to identify ‘who I am’ and ‘why I’m here’.

Digging deep – getting ghosts out of the closet

Relationships become as important, if not more important, as the results. Start any and all leadership initiatives with a customised bridge to inner alignment, and then extend it to partnership alignment. Only then will dedicated leadership theories have any relevance and the slightest chance of impacting positively; after all would you continue to build a house if the foundation is cracked?

Debbie Nicol, the managing director of Dubai-based business en motion, is a consultant working with strategic change, leadership and organisational development. Email her at debbie.nicol@businessenmotion.com for thoughts about your corporate change initiative



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