Strong leadership goes beyond the merely cosmetic

Debbie Nicol

November 16, 2014 *Updated: November 16, 2014 06:35 PM*

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Here's a leadership "wow" if ever there's been one: printable make-up. Yes, printable make-up, from a printer that produces a lady's preferred colour of eyeshadow in a matter of minutes. Did that catch your attention?

What's that got to do with leadership? Some might say that the concept of printable make-up is about innovation, not leadership. I beg to differ as it's not the outcome but the very reason that Grace Choi, the founder of a one-woman New York-based start-up, Mink, embarked on her business journey that makes this a leadership case study. In her mind, it was time to stop a US$65 billion industry from disadvantaging women. Why shouldn't women be able to match an outfit with a relatively low-cost make-up option? In Ms Choi's mind, it was time to shift power from "big boys" to the playing field, allowing ladies to "print high-quality products at drug store prices".

Ms Choi had something she cared for and felt deeply about. This was passionately charged and became her personal mission and way to contribute. Are you a Ms Choi yourself, one who has connection and meaning in life? How can you reach that stage in life?

1. Keep your feelers open

Leaders recognise frustration. Is a system too slow and getting tempers frayed? It's time for convenience and freedom of choice. Is a problem unsolved? It's time to find a better way. Is there a demographic that is treated unfairly? Create a solution that brings equity.

We've all heard of people who believe it's not right to kill stray animals then set up animal shelters. There are even illustrators who paint stories for the illiterate. Behind all of these situations lie reasons for living, purposes to achieve. Keep your feelers out for the times when you become frustrated or emotional, and within that emotion there's an opportunity for change.

2. Identify the "what" and let the "how" emerge

Trust me, it's OK not to have all the answers. There is help out there in ways and means we cannot explain. When clarity of the "what" exists, things start happening around you – exactly the right person to help can be introduced to you when you least expect it, or that essential information you needed suddenly pops up on your screen. A small example I experienced was when I needed an introduction and it fell into my lap after I won a competition. For some time, I had been in awe of a media personality who seemed relatively difficult to reach and to spend time with; relationship-based business requires an understanding of the person first before the business need. By winning the competition, I received deeper insights into who this personality is. Grace Choi would never have known how to patent a product but I can bet that came her way once she was building the prototype machine.

3. Act and "be" the change

Personify the change your idea will create, even before the device is built, the product is created or the experience exists. It was the frustration or emotion that dragged you into this, so the freedom from that frustration or emotion will manifest itself in all you do.

Leadership is everyone's job. Can these steps apply on all scales such as small changes in the workplace? Absolutely, yes. And what about community projects? Aren't we all frustrated in some way in the supermarket or on the roads?Projects that engage the community can often succeed, but let's keep things in perspective and realise that Rome wasn't built in a day.

We may not all be frustrated by the price of make-up yet we can all leave our mark on this world in some small way. Leadership is a responsibility that we can choose to take on board – why not observe yourself for a week or two? After all, many others are.

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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