

The likeability link to good leadership

Debbie Nicol

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In the words of Jim Kouzes, the co-author of *The Leadership Challenge*, who wants to do their best for someone they dislike?

Many years ago, I was placed under the wings of a senior leader in a corporate environment. Life was not easy at that point of my career, with every action of mine under scrutiny. Reports were rewritten, presentations restructured, approaches to teamwork discussed and targets were constantly re-forecasted in an upwards manner. I lived in the land of “re-work”. Did I learn and change a lot as a developing leader? Most certainly, yes. Did I like the pressure my boss put me under at the time? Not really. Yet he clearly could see something I could not.

A leader takes others to places they cannot see or have not been, a future full of hope, one that removes frustration and inefficiency and replaces it with alignment and new outcomes. The most effective leaders do this through grace and influence so that followers are willingly travelling the road of change with them. Others may achieve this through “tough love”. Sentences such as: “I don’t care if they don’t like me, they just need to respect me.” are often overheard in the depths and backwaters of corporate corridors.

Does the willingness to follow depend on the degree of likeability in the relationship? What might happen if the locus of control was firmly in the hands of the followers, and not the leader?

The research by Mr Kouzes and his co-author Barry Posner in *The Leadership Challenge* indicate three important points relevant to ordinary people achieving extraordinary things:

- Most people do their best work when challenged
- The best leaders are the best learners
- Engagement levels increase when leaders are clear about their voice or “guiding principles”

So, here are some factors for leaders to consider:

1. Support during challenges influences likeability

Nobody ever excels by doing the same thing over and over again. Challenge presents itself in many ways from an unexpected downturn, natural disasters, technology disruption or even increased competition. It is at times like those that personal bests emerge. Many feel lost during unpredictable, ambiguous times, and when aligned sets of values offer sanctuary during chaos, and voices and messages align with actions that add value, a lifebuoy has been cast. Just as a lifebuoy supports a drowning swimmer, so does a leader who provides genuine care, support and direction. Would that affect the way you view your leader in the likeability stakes?

2. Learning during change influences likeability

Facing uncertain or changing directions indicates new horizons. At times like

that, a leader is “flying blind” and no matter what the action, reflection and learning opportunities abound. Vulnerability comes hand in hand with learning. Alongside this vulnerability and unintentional transparency, levels of skills and knowledge are exposed. It will be obvious what is known, what is not yet known and just how much more can be known. When mistakes are translated into learning, indicating what not to do next time, it relieves pressure, brings equality to all and reinforces the reality of navigating new territory. When communal learning occurs, it removes hierarchy, separation and control. Would that affect the way you view your leader in the likeability stakes?

3. Clarity of beliefs and values influence likeability

Effective leaders are comfortable in their own skin and walk their talk comfortably and consistently. They tell a story that others see themselves in. They exude confidence in beliefs and values, and earn credibility due to them. People around a true leader know they can trust them – they pass the litmus test of “what you see is what you get”. This, in turn, is rewarded with greater engagement.

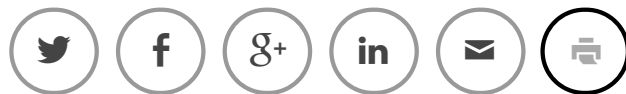
According to Kouzes, when leaders are clear about their leadership philosophy, they report 25 per cent more engagement in a workplace. When team members report that their leaders are clear about their leadership philosophy, they themselves feel 40 per cent more engaged than those who say “the person I work for is not very clear”. Would that affect the way you view your leader in the likeability stakes?

Leaders perform at their personal best while also cultivating extraordinary results in others. They recognise conflict contains opportunity and capitalise on it. They pave paths where others cannot. They find ways to make things work. They celebrate small wins and recognise and reward a spirit of community. In my book, that list of achievements is nothing short of return on investment. If I was surrounded by those actions on a daily basis, it would most certainly have me curious, focused, energised and in a continual cycle of achievement.

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

business@thenational.ae

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