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Looking for leadership in good times and bad

Continuing the Leisure Review on leadership series, Andy Reed, chair of the Sport and Recreation Alliance, considers what leadership looks like and explains why the combination of vision and confidence is essential to the process.

Being a leader – or at least being an effective leader – is never easy. But it is true what Martyn says in the original piece in this series: that being a leader in troubling times presents a particular set of challenges.

At the Sport and Recreation Alliance I am currently going through the process of recruiting a new CEO and while we are looking for somebody to lead through managing our 'business', the need for genuine leadership is also a key, separate competency for the role. So defining leadership itself is not always easy and neither is recruiting someone with those qualities.

Genuine leadership shows not just the usual management skills but also demands good political skills, the ability to manage change, and to gain and retain the confidence of a wide range of stakeholders in your vision. Communicating the vision and creating followers inside and outside the organisation gives space for a leader to take risks.

We live in a world of fast-paced change and risk-taking is necessary. I find that people understand that change is required but it is often in the hope that after a period of adjustment there is a return to 'normal times'. However, a good leader recognises that change is constant and excites those around them to be excited by the opportunity this presents.

I have found that the best way to create that enthusiasm and sense of opportunity is to offer vision and instil confidence.

The ability to anticipate the future – to see the way the world, or their own smaller version of it, is changing – and use that information to inform the thinking is an invaluable skill to have. People do not want to see a leader who always reacts or responds. Dodging bullets is a useful skill but you're better off if you are firing them.

Employees or followers want to see someone who can anticipate challenges and create a capacity to deal with them or avoid them before they come along. A leader needs to show that he or she has the ability to see what might be around the corner and then to deal with it.

With that vision comes an ability to inspire confidence and the two are inextricably linked. There's a reason people say that confidence, like a salary, is earned and that is because it comes in small chunks of payback in return for real action and deeds. And it is only by delivering against your vision that you earn the payback of people's confidence.

There is no harm in being thoughtful or meditative, in taking the time to plot a careful course. But once you have settled upon a direction, I have found that what people are looking for is someone they can place their trust in. As a leader, it is not enough just to have a vision: you also need to be able to inspire others with it. But once you have done that, and won people's confidence, there is a power that gives them the freedom, the space and also the drive to tackle the challenges in their everyday work.

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But just as confidence can be earned, it can also ebb away. That is why being a good leader also requires sustained energy and drive.

In choppy waters – when the funding cuts kick in, when the mood on the board is gloomy or when a key project stutters – it can be easy to sink. That is a dangerous time. Poor leaders will sometimes now resign themselves to the fates and choose to tread water until the tide turns – waiting for events to turn in their favour. But I believe that a good leader is constantly on the move, radiating energy, enthusiasm and ideas, in good times and in bad. You might not always be moving back towards the safety of the shore but by swimming sideways you can avoid the riptide. Energy, and not just in bursts, is part of what makes a good leader in troubling times.

But your energy, confidence and vision also need to be focused in the right area. In sports leadership, I can see that innovation will be an important factor in which organisations sink or swim.

The more go-ahead organisations have already embraced change and in doing so have rejected the sirens of comfortable convention. Like Kodak and camera film, Blockbuster and videos, the commercial world is littered with examples of companies who have struggled to adapt to the changes in the way people behave. Sport will be no exception but to a large extent it will be up to its leaders to decide who grows and who shrinks.

Part of me accepts that a new leadership skill is to understand that disruptive technologies; business markets are to be embraced, not fought off. All too often we see outsiders as threats but we need to learn how to embrace not reject.

Leaders who are driving technology through their organisations to deliver efficiencies will be better bets. National governing bodies with good customer relationship management, strong digital communications, club organising apps, the ability to sell tickets or activities to well-segmented audiences will all have a bigger chance of winning the race of life.

Leaders who are encouraging innovation in the way their activity is delivered or organised will have a better chance of thriving. Introducing short-cut versions, targeting new audiences or deformatilising versions of a sport will all increase the chances of survival.

Leaders who are modernising their organisations' governance structures and placing powers in the hands of skilled, competent people, and away from Buggins' turn appointments, are setting up their organisations for success rather than failure.

Leadership may not always just come from within the existing sector and management. Indeed, following my theme of disruptive leadership, there will be examples of great leadership coming from those who have the vision to find new ways of delivering for new markets. I have seen this in so many spheres in and around sports bodies. Big clunky responses to problems or opportunities inside big organisations are shown up for what they are by new leaders to the sector.

Vision, confidence, energy, innovation. My ingredients for strong leadership in troubled times are not exotic or bizarre. To be honest, they are fairly obvious. And you will find them in good leaders in good times too.

So there is little disagreement with Martyn in his original article: "Good leadership in these difficult times is about getting the right blend of vision and strategic thinking, boldness, risk-taking and drive but underpinned by honesty, integrity and care for those involved. That is

what good leaders do. That is good leadership.”

I am sure he is right and therefore I do not believe leadership can be taught. It is about values, integrity, inspiration and emotional intelligence. A leader can be taught management but not the other way round.

Andy Reed is chair of the Sport and Recreation Alliance

All articles in this series can be found via the Leisure Review on leadership homepage.

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