Leadership skills for uncertain contexts

Today’s business climate is characterised by high levels of uncertainty, tough competition, limited resources and considerable pressure to perform. Traditional leadership skills don’t work particularly well in this context, and this means that many leaders are struggling in their efforts to keep things on course.

Traditional leadership skills are designed for more predictable environments in which innovations and improvements can be mapped out strategically, worked on systematically, and teams get a sense of being part of something that is progressing. However, now that the going is a bit more bumpy and uncertain, leaders need to develop additional capabilities if they are to help teams and organizations maintain a sense of purpose, direction and balance.

Drawing on my research over the last few years, and my direct experience of what works in practice, I recommend the following...

1 Presence and ‘deep listening’

Presence is an essential skill for keeping calm, grounded and aware when everything around you is chaotic and uncertain. It involves ‘deep listening’, which means being open beyond your pre-conceptions and historical ways of making sense, and being acutely aware what of what’s going on in the present moment. This allows leaders to operate from a deeper sense of what is real and truly required at any one time, so moving beyond current loyalties or short-term agendas.

It also means letting go of the need for absolute control – and getting in touch with a more profound sense of personal purpose. This involves learning how to trust that if you play your part well, things will ultimately unfold in exactly the right way. It’s not essential to manage everything!

2 Framing

Framing is a fundamental skill for leaders of change to master. This enables leaders to steer their teams
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through the unchartered waters of change by continually letting them know i) where they are in the story of change, in a way that connects with deeper purpose and ii) what’s required next. It is a guiding rather than controlling way of leading.

When a leader is ‘framing’ he or she defines a clear context and boundaries for whatever requires attention. This means painting a picture that illustrates the change destination, keeping teams in touch with the story as it’s unfolding, and holding this frame consistently so that others can engage with it and ‘fill it in’ as things progress. It can also mean setting out the broad phases of change and key milestones so that others can get a sense of how this process is going to feel, without being told precisely what they need to do, by when...

3 Containing

The constant requirement to deliver change in an uncertain context is a highly stressful business for leaders. Absorbing the boss’s and/or stakeholder anxiety, being under increased scrutiny regarding performance, living with imperfect decisions, dealing with the team’s concerns and managing one’s own anxieties – these things all take their toll. To lead well within this swirling cocktail of emotions, leaders need to become skilled at containing.

In the psychodynamic world, ‘containment’ means providing a holding environment where anxieties can safely be worked through and processed in a healthy way. For leaders, this means facing their own anxieties in a suitably private and supported way, so that they can then confidently allow difficult conversations to happen around them, rather than insisting on having everything under control. This isn’t easy, of course, and requires considerable self-awareness, self-discipline, courage – and practice!

4 Negative capability

When there is pressure to deliver at pace, leaders often find themselves driving progress and trying to demonstrate achievement, even if it may be much more effective to create space for further thinking and
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continued struggling, while waiting patiently for a solution to emerge.

*Positive capability* is the more familiar face of leadership, which features decisive, active interventions based on knowing. *Negative capability* can be defined as the ability to ‘wait without expectations’ while supporting teams and individuals to continue wrestling with difficult issues, by holding or ‘containing’ a situation or context (as above!) in order that the wisest way forward may emerge.

It takes considerable skill for a leader to remain detached enough to know, not only how, but also when, to act – especially when there is such pressure for tangible progress and focus on the bottom line.

5 Practising self-care

Continued pressure in an uncertain environment is often associated with leadership burn-out. Becoming a successful and healthy leader in the 21st Century means developing a quietened mind and a capacity for delayed gratification, which takes quite some dedication. This means appreciating and noticing the longer-term effects of actions. It also means having a different relationship with your inner critic – identifying and accepting this part of your psychic structure, yet not necessarily ‘buying in’ to it.

Practices such as meditation, yoga or tai chi can really help, as well as the regular use of a set of simple mindfulness exercises. At a much more basic level, getting enough sleep, taking regular exercise, eating healthily, avoiding too much alcohol, as well as finding time to connect with the relatively unchanging aspects of your life that are valued, such as family, music, community etc. are all ways that leaders can support themselves through times of stress, change and uncertainty.

This list is featured in an expanded form in Esther’s book *Making Sense of Change Management*.

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Recent clients include Tata Steel Europe, Shell, Various Whitehall Departments in the UK, and Canaccord Genuity Wealth Management.

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