



Leadership Resilience in Testing Times

By Richard Izard

Leaders in organisations throughout the world are facing challenges the magnitude of which is beyond anything they have known in their lifetime. Challenges are coming from all sides - financial stability, lack of credit, and sharp changes in customer expectations are some of the well reported issues. In addition, leaders face pressure from their stakeholders, including their staff, and perhaps less obviously from within themselves.

One of the key characteristics of these times is an increase in uncertainty. Not surprisingly, the key thing that staff and other stakeholders are looking for from their leaders is an antidote to this uncertainty. The response of most leaders to this very human need is to put on their 'superperson' vests and gallop like the cavalry to the rescue, finding ways to reassure everyone that things will be fine and there is no need to worry.

The unspoken assumption is that the leader should know all the answers and thereby be able to reduce the anxiety.

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The problem is, not only that leaders do not have all the answers to the current crisis, but also that the very idea that they should creates an unhealthy dependent relationship. Blanket assurances from the leader either seem to lack credibility or merely pass anxiety from the staff back to the leader.

Only the most confident leaders have the strength to be truly authentic and admit that they do not have all the answers, showing their vulnerability, their not knowing.

In the words of Mother Theresa:

"Honesty and transparency make you vulnerable. Be honest and transparent anyway."

Those that do show their vulnerability create a whole different psychological contract with their staff. Instead of a parent-to-child relationship - *"Don't worry you can depend on me, I'll sort it out"* - you get an adult-to-adult relationship where the leader says, *"I don't have all the answers and we are in this together to make sense of these changes"*.

Not only does this take a confident and authentic leader, there is also a challenge for their staff. Instead of being able to sit back and expect the boss to sort it out there is an implicit invitation to get stuck in, to give the best of themselves, to be part of the solution in a process of joint sense making where a collective 'esprit de corps' develops and everyone involved becomes a joint author of the way through.

The truth, in these times more than ever, is that the leader is in charge but not in control. The old model of 'cause and effect' - *if I do this then that will happen* - has been shown to be flawed in many ways. The implications of this are vast. If a leader can't know the outcome of their actions they can at least work with everyone in the organisation to make sense of what is going on, not only to reach the best decisions but also to make the organisation flexible to respond when the outcome is not as it was expected to be.

Pressure seems to bring out the worst in most of us. One of the typical responses for leaders is to try to become something that they are not. Some leaders even go on courses to learn new skills for example, to be more charismatic. How can this make any sense? It is like teaching an old dog a new trick. Authentic leadership surely comes from being the best expression of who you are, not trying to become something you are not.

The role of the executive coach here is to help leaders be that best expression of who they are by helping them to free up and grow their natural strengths - not by teaching them gimmicks that their staff, who know them well, will see through in an instant.

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Leaders who know themselves and who are comfortable in their own skins are the ones that have the best chance to flourish during these times of uncertainty. For many leaders the self critical voice in their heads is what drives them and yet it is also what limits them. Self confidence doesn't come from being all knowing it comes from realistic self appraisal and the opportunity to put the genuine strengths the leader has to best use. In this sense the leader is the same as everyone else in the organisation.

Authentic not knowing and demonstrating the strength and commitment to find answers are a very attractive mix for a leader to have. It is in this way that they have the best chance to engage their staff in a mature and adult relationship and jointly have the best chance to weather the current storm and flourish in the future.