

# Getting the message right | The challenge of being a leader

Clear vision and good communication are crucial to effective leadership says **Paul Bridle**, Leadership Methodologist, and one of the experts available in the region through the Knowledge Brokers



**The role of** the leader is to keep people focused and make sure that they know how they contribute and impact on the outcome. This requires communicating again and again.

This is the day and age when the difference between two competing businesses is not the product but rather the service that is offered. For example, have you looked at cars recently? The difference between one make and another is very small. Car dealers are having to offer 0% finance and free insurance to attract customers. The trouble with this is that everyone starts to offer the same deal. So customers are attracted by the service they get as they wander around the dealerships.

The same applies to buying just about anything. I recently went around a range of shops looking for a new jacket. At each and every shop I went into, the service was identical. I was greeted at the door with a friendly, fixed smile and the same boring question, "Can I help you Sir?". The products varied very little as each shop had similar styles and colours but with different labels. Price was also within the same range and did not make a significant difference. Finally a store where the shop assistant said something different! He greeted me and said, "Welcome to my store. If there is anything I can help you with I am over here. I hope you find something that you will be proud to wear from our collection," and he kept wandering around creating a mood of the shop as an upbeat, friendly - and even exciting - place to shop.

What this shop assistant did was talk about the shop as though it was his own, and then took ownership for creating an atmosphere where it feels good to shop. I had a compelling urge to buy something from this shop because it was so friendly and I felt good being there.

A leader has the responsibility to ensure that people are clear about what the company is trying to generate. It is not enough to have product knowledge and a pleasant smile. *People need to know the competitive advantage that their company has over any other company.* Notice the words in that sentence.

- **Competitive advantage** is the unique angle or approach that the business takes that makes it stand out from the others. This is nearly always reliant on the service the business offers.
- **their company** implies that this is not just a job or a place to go to work, but rather that they act and think of the business as their own. In other words they would behave as though they personally owned the business and wanted to make it a success.

In both these cases, the leader has the job of ensuring that the employee has a full understanding and is completely focused on what the business is about and what it is trying to achieve. It is also about making sure that the employee takes ownership to contribute and create what is necessary for this to happen.

I recently spoke to South African Travel Agents who have had their business change on them. Airlines are no longer paying commission on ticket sales! They don't even have the ability to be able to offer discounts but rather have to charge a fee on top of the fixed price of a ticket.

Think of that as a new pressure on a business. These are businesses that are going to have to move from being order takers to being consultants that charge for their knowledge and skills for helping you to choose a safe and reliable way to travel.

These travel agents can no longer see their competitive advantage as being based on their technology, their premises, their advertising campaign or their ability to give away a discount. A new approach is needed. Employees are going to have to learn new skills and they will need to know exactly what the business needs them to do that will make them attractive to their client base.

The leaders of these organisations will need to be sure that people understand what is required of them because what their staff do will (in most cases) be the single factor that differentiates them from their competitors. So the leader has the challenge of knowing, communicating, developing and sustaining the standards and environment they need to survive in business.

It is sometimes useful to see the leader as the conductor of an orchestra. His role is to constantly ensure that the people in his orchestra are all doing their role to create the right sound and mood for the listener. This is his primary role. Too many leaders are so focused on doing the job themselves that they forget that the role of the leader is to ensure that everyone is doing what they should be doing.

The same principle applies to nations as it does to business. Last year I visited Dubai and was impressed that taxi drivers were telling me about the 10 year plan for Dubai. They were proud of the developments taking place in their city. However last month when I came every taxi driver was telling me about how bad the traffic was in this city. Notice the shift from "their" to "this" in their language. As a visitor the impression I initially had was that the sense of pride and ownership that the people had for their country and city. This is now replaced with resentment for the problems

they were having with traffic congestion.

As someone who drives around London, I did not see the traffic as that bad. But to these people they were telling me that the influx of tourists was becoming a problem. What a switch. Last year the tourists were good for the future and the long term economy of Dubai. This year they are the cause of some of the worst aspects of the city!!!

Look at the recent results in the European Union when France and Netherlands voted 'No' to the new constitution. Are people against a united Europe? No, of course they are not. They voted based on the image they have of the negative aspects of the way Europe is being governed. People notice all the bad things that are happening as a result of the Brussels government decisions. The leaders of each country have not managed the expectations of their people, they have not helped people associate with the good aspects of what is happening, but rather allowed people to notice what is wrong with decisions coming out of Brussels and even used these issues to make them look good.

Now they stand back in awe at the way people react!

As a leader you need to ask yourself, are you busy trying to play the instruments or are you leading the musicians? Are you clear on the sound and feeling you are wanting the audience to hear and enjoy?

This is the job of the leader. If you do not have the clarity of thought, then be assured your people won't and so your customer get what ever happens on the day. ■

## Profile

Paul is currently a Leadership Advisor for the Institute of Leadership and Management; a faculty member and regular international speaker for the Institute of Management Studies; an Enterprise Advisor for the UK Government's National Enterprise Advisory Service, and an Investor in People Assessor for national and international organisations.

He is also a member of the British Coaching Academy and is both a private and business coach

to assist individuals looking to improve their personal performance.

Paul is past president of Professional Speakers Association and is 2004-05 President for the International Federation For Professional Speakers.

His work is now devoted mainly to developing and training people to build successful organisations.

His specialised area is in 'Leadership' where he has spent over 16 years researching the subject and developing training and coaching programmes.

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