

Leading with Agility

Trouble looms for any senior executive who thinks they have all the answers. **Neil Griffiths**, Board Mentor at Criticaleye, shares his thoughts on why the most successful leaders are passionate about self-improvement and know how to build great teams

It has never been more difficult for business leaders to anticipate the future. While technology and industry disaggregation are often perceived to be the greatest threats to commercial success, local and geopolitical changes through policy, regulation and legislation, are also having a major impact on businesses.

I spend a lot of time mentoring senior executives, concentrating their minds on what is needed to become the very best leaders. One of the most important attributes of a leader is to be able to challenge constructively and to encourage challenge from others.

Without challenge, “group think” is never far away, however, a leader must ensure they create a safe environment so that people feel empowered and bold enough to challenge upwards.

Inclusive challenge is a great skill to leverage the difference between individual accountability and collective responsibility. For example, the question, “What are you doing about underperformance?”, has very different connotations when contrasted with the more inclusive: “What can we do to re-address under performance and what resources and support do you need to achieve it?”

The best leaders create the very best team of experts around them. They understand that asking for help is not a weakness and that you need to be honest about your capabilities. One of the most enlightening moments in my career was when I asked a FTSE 30 CFO a question and they replied: “I don’t know, what are your thoughts?”

Two great learnings came out of that moment: firstly, if you are going to ask a difficult question, make sure that you have some ideas and solutions; secondly, it gave me permission to behave in the same way, admitting I >



didn't have the answer to everything and encouraging others to offer solutions before offering my own opinion.

Another key element to get right is transparency. Supportive leaders shouldn't be phased when presented with problems or mistakes (ideally, you would prefer they're raised early and with options and solutions). Blame cultures frequently encourage individuals to hide and suppress problems in the vain hope that they will have time to rectify an issue before its discovered, however this frequently exacerbates the situation.

I'm a huge advocate of Stephen Covey's book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, which has been around since the late 1980s. The reason for its longevity is that it focuses on fairness, integrity, honesty and respect – key attributes of great leaders. Two of the most powerful habits, in my opinion, are vision and listening skills.

When considering vision, it's essential to "begin with the end in mind". Great leaders will have a view of the desired direction and destination, however, they must continue to be agile enough on the journey to review and modify accordingly if they are to achieve the end goal. The ability to be a great storyteller, to ensure that the vision is clearly understood irrespective of the audience, is critical.

Stop and Think

Covey advocates that "one should seek first to understand and then seek to be understood". Deep listening skills are critical to grasp underlying problems, issues and motives. This includes not only your team, but also other important stakeholders.

“Without authenticity, it is hard to be truly trusted as a leader”

Self-reflection is a must for any individual to help personal development. A leader must have a deep understanding of themselves to see what kind of impact they might have on an organisation. It is important for anyone, reflecting on their own leadership potential, to ask themselves three very honest questions: "What kind of leader am I?"; "What kind of leader do I want to be?"; and "What do I want to be known for?"

It's at this point, where a trusted colleague or mentor can provide assistance and help you develop and improve in certain areas. You can impart your thoughts upon and ask them to give you honest feedback as to whether your actions are in line with your own goals. That desire to improve and change is vital in the current business environment, where flexibility and openness is a must for the modern leader.

Mastering an understanding of when to be inclusive, reflective and decisive is a real skill as one style does not fit all. For instance, effective leadership in a high-growth business is unlikely to be applicable to a company that finds itself in a turnaround situation. Indeed, one of the hardest self-reflective questions an individual can ask is: "Do I fit with what the business needs now and, if not, can I flex my leadership style to ensure success?"

This ties into the need to be authentic. As a leader moves to higher organisational levels, it is important to remember that the eyes of the organisation are upon you. Your actions, words and deeds give permission to others within the business to replicate them. The culture is driven from the very top and it is critical to ensure that you live the values that you extol.

The killer question is: "Am I being authentic?" Without authenticity, it is hard to be truly trusted as a leader.

With the ever-increasing speed of change and fog of uncertainty, leaders will need to continually hone their leadership skills, combining it with the courage, tenacity, resilience and agility needed to succeed. ■

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Neil's career spans 30 years with blue chip corporate and private equity businesses covering the retail, leisure and property sectors. He serves as a Non-executive Director on the Board of City Pub Group, an AIM-listed leisure business, and StarStock, a PE-backed e-commerce drinks business.

Neil has experience of pan-European development, operational management and roll out of branded retail and leisure operations. He was COO of Punch Taverns from 2013-16. At its peak, Punch was a FTSE 100 company with around 10,000 operational units.

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