

Leadership in a Remote Environment

The Covid-19 Challenge – is it a new leadership challenge?

Does leadership change in a remote, fast changing and uncertain business environment? In principle, no, but to remain effective leaders do have to adapt their style to the environment and circumstances.

The challenge is how to be an effective leader when a high proportion of the organisation's employees are working remotely, when uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity create anxiety, when the leader is unable to be as visible and connected to employees as we expect, and when the enforced use of technology makes establishing a rapport difficult.

We think that C19 has introduced a new leadership challenge. In some respects that is true, but certain leadership qualities are enduring too.

What C19 has done is to cause us to re-examine how we lead remotely and exploit new technologies. However, remote working is not new – some of history's greatest leaders have had to overcome remote working, often in the most challenging of circumstances. They have shown that leading remotely can be very effective.

I shall outline five leadership qualities, which I believe are enduring and effective, and set out how they can be adapted and exploited in a remote setting. In doing so, I shall draw on two of history's greatest leaders who had remoteness as a challenge, on the military's mission command philosophy, and on my experience both as a military officer and a performance director in a service company with over 400 teams across the UK.

1. Purpose

Successful organisations and companies have a vision, from which purpose is deduced. Stating the purpose of the organisation, why the organisation exists and why it adopts a particular direction of travel are key to giving a sense of purpose to every employee.

To give clear, concise and compelling direction to the organisation the leader could consider a commercial variant the Commander's Intent from the military leadership philosophy of Mission Command. The leader's intent should be at two levels. At the strategic level, it should state the organisation's purpose and what the organisation seeks to achieve and why. At the operational, contract or project level, it should state the objectives and desired outcomes that the leader aims to achieve for the investment in a project.

In a fast changing economic and business environment, there are two challenges for the leader in stating intent. First, is the situation changing? Evidently, C19 has changed the business environment. Once his ship became entombed in the ice in 1915, Ernest Shackleton changed his intent from exploration to survival. Leaders must ensure that the intent is relevant for the circumstances. Second, the leader's statement of intent should set out why the organisation is proposing to take a course of action. Even if the organisation has a multi-page strategy document, a simple statement should be in every employee's mind as they undertake their work and importantly when they encounter an unforeseen or unplanned scenario. A clear, compelling statement of intent, just one paragraph (or at least no more than a page), is a key means by which the leader stays connected with the workforce and the workforce understanding why a course of action is advocated and what has to be achieved.

The military uses analysis and orders to plan and execute a battle, but drawing on the adage that the plan never survives contact with the enemy, because they have a different plan, so soldiers must be able to use their initiative to achieve the commander's intent even when the plan has become less relevant. In short, they need to be empowered. Field Marshall William Slim always drafted his statement of intent in the Fourteenth Army's operational orders (leaving the other parts of the orders to his staff).

Working remotely does not change the need for this essential statement of intent. Indeed, it makes it more important that the leader makes their intention clear across the whole organisation, thus giving purpose to everyone.

Slim's Army was deployed over thousands of square miles in Burma and India much of it out of telegraph and radio coverage, yet as he transformed the Army after the defeat in Burma at the hands of the Japanese, he was able to cascade his intent down through the chain of command so that his equivalent of team leaders, supervisors and managers understood what was expected of them during any give phase (the phases of rebuilding the army, preparing for offensive operations and conducting the offensive). This approach gave every soldier *awareness* of the situation, what needed to be done, and a sense of purpose.

In the 1940s, they used verbal and written orders and some radio orders. Today we can use webinars, teams and zoom conferences to speak directly to employees. Giving every employee the leader's intent is a key leadership quality and connectivity technology enables us to do so quickly and effectively.

2. Visibility

The greatest leaders are visible to their employees, active in the pursuit of the purpose, and authentic. Slim visited as many front line units as he could, standing on a vehicle bonnet to deliver his intent, give confidence and raise morale. However, sheer distance and the number of units meant that not every unit had their 'bonnet' talk from Slim himself.

Webinars, Teams and Zoom now give leaders a 'bonnet', albeit it a digital one on every smartphone tablet, laptop or wall screen, so every leader can stay connected with every employee, who in turn can see the leader. The question is how can a leader optimise their visibility and authenticity and establish a rapport on a screen. With detailed planning covering the message, tone, lighting, dress and backdrop, the experience for the employee can be similar to the leader standing on the bonnet. The physical effort by the leader of going to the workforce's site can be replicated with careful planning and rehearsing so they can be connected and visible 'digitally.'

Being visible, active and authentic not only makes employees aware of what needs to be done in challenging times, but also begins to create within them a *desire* to change and make their organisation a success.

3. Employees First

The leader who puts his/her people first is one who recognizes a fundamental issue. When people are inspired to achieve great results, believe in what they do, are supported in doing it, and feel that they are valued and have the respect and recognition of the leader, then they will have pride in their organization, perform better, go the extra mile, and promote the organisation willingly.

Every person counts in an organisation. Shackleton faced an existential environment once his ship became entombed in the ice. Without hope of rescue, he knew that to survive every member of the team mattered. He understood that the crew's greatest enemies were anxiety, fear of hopelessness and disengagement. To lead them out of what could have been death, he knew he had to serve their interests. He exemplified the leadership ethos of Royal Military Academy Sandhurst where its motto is *Serve to Lead*. The Academy teaches officers to lead by their unselfish example, instil moral courage, strive for the highest standards, and create a strong work ethic. At the core of the motto is serving those one has the privilege to lead, where the leader puts their people first and inspires them to become high performing teams based on every single person feeling motivated, respected, trusted and valued.

The question is how can this state be achieved remotely. The C19 crisis is damaging many livelihoods as furlough has reduced incomes for many and once the scheme ends on 31 October 2020, those organisations that do not have sufficient financial reserves or access to additional funding or are unable to sell the quantity of products or services needed to pay wages will see redundancies. This will cause, indeed is causing anxiety, fear of being out of a job and disengagement.

Arguably, three leadership qualities can reduce anxiety and show that employees are valued. First, communications, where leaders need to be honest about the situation, as Slim was with his troops that they were the lowest priority for resources (the European theatre was a higher priority), and outline a way forward not just for survival, but how to thrive again.

Second, the leadership team should share the pain. When the Fourteenth Army was short of rations, Slim reduced them for everyone and made sure that his HQ staff and rear logistics units had the same rations. This had two stimuli: it demonstrated to those in the front-line that the leaders were sharing the pain equally and it spurred the logisticians to improve the supply of rations quickly. Are retention of full executive pay and bonuses during the crisis the commercial equivalent of rations?

Third, the leader should look for ways to improve the outlook of employees. The notion of '*what's in it for me*' is a powerful motivator, so small, affordable ideas to improve the outlook should be sought.

While seldom as powerful as physically meeting and conversing with employees, using the same tactics as for being visible, including interactive digital meetings, is a good alternative to stay connected in remote circumstances. The greatest challenge for the leader is being authentic and being perceived as such. Here, actions may speak louder than words as it is those actions that will contribute to creating a *desire* among employees to succeed.

4. Morale

Turning a low morale organisation around is arguably the greatest leadership challenge. There are many organisations today where due to C19 morale will be low. I discuss morale fourth, not because it is the fourth priority, I believe it is the primary priority, but rebuilding morale needs a foundation comprising a sense of purpose, a visible and active leader and a belief among employees they are valued in the organisation.

Slim and Shackleton understood that morale is a state of mind and both set out to raise morale to give belief that the circumstances the army and the crew faced could be overcome. Slim's army had been defeated, had suffered heavy casualties, had witnessed atrocities to their soldiers during the retreat, and was very short of resources. Shackleton's crew was ice bound with no hope of rescue.

Slim knew that to create the conditions for victory, to make the necessary changes, and turn the army around, his highest priority was to address low morale. He reasoned that morale covers three dimensions. First, a spiritual dimension (not in a religious sense) whereby he gave his soldiers a cause and a sense of **purpose**. He had to instil in every soldier that whatever the soldier did and however he performed it mattered – he was valued.

Second, the intellectual dimension whereby he gave every soldier a **belief** that they could defeat the enemy, which they viewed as superior. He focused on low level tactics (commercial equivalent – small customer services and/or sells) and through training he gave them *knowledge* and *ability* so raising competence and confidence. Early in the transformation he sought carefully planned small wins to prove the prowess of the soldier and through these give a belief that they could win the forthcoming offensive.

Third, the materiel dimension, whereby he was open and honest about the resource situation (they named themselves the Forgotten Army!). So, he created a culture of **self-improvement** and innovation. When they could not get silk parachutes for supply drops, they made parachutes out of jute.

Slim knew that by linking the three dimensions (*purpose, belief, improvement*) with being visible and active and placing his soldiers first that not only would morale, competence and confidence improve, but crucially, he created the *desire* among them to win.

Was this only theoretical? No, morale, competence and confidence were severely tested in the Arakan campaign (where Captain Sir Tom Moore fought) when the enemy had an initial success and surrounded units, headquarters and logistic depots. The soldiers had a belief that they would overcome the initial adversity despite the precarious situation – and they did. They could not have done so had the foundations of morale been weak.

So, what are the lessons for crisis management and remote working? Slim provides a framework in which business leaders can assess and improve morale. While face to face discussions will always be better, with a large, dispersed, remote workforce this is not always possible (even before C19). However, today's business leader can use physical and digital 'bonnets' to stay connected and address morale, noting that today's bonnet must encourage listening, discussing and sharing ideas between employees and the leader too. The keys to success are addressing the three dimensions of morale and being authentic.

5. Empowerment

Empowerment is an oft quoted aspiration, but seldom well understood or exploited. The concept is grounded in two recognitions. First, a recognition that in war a plan seldom survives contact with enemy. This is the friction of war. Therefore, to achieve the mission soldiers must use their initiative. In business there is business friction, not the human kind, but the process kind when systems and processes do not perform as intended and cause frustration at best and lost customers, profits and reputation at worst.

Second, a business with a high volume of information, business processes, locations, interactions, decisions and customers is one where it is difficult for the leader to know the necessary detail to act on every issue in a timely manner. Information overload, the pace of interactions and business friction need to be countered in a timely and agile manner and at the local level to stay ahead of competition. Being agile requires the leader to empower employees to fulfil the **intent** and trust them to act quickly and effectively. Those that embrace empowerment will realise benefits in performance, issue resolution, profits, employee and customers satisfaction, and reputation.

To realise the benefits of empowerment the leader should focus on five elements:

- **Intent**, state the mission and objectives (and why) and set out their intent for achieving them so employees know what they are expected to do.
- **Train**, train employees so they have the skills to do their job and can use their judgment to solve issues not covered by the plan.
- **Initiative**, encourage employees to do the right thing within the spirit of the leader's intent and within any predefined boundaries of action (these should be with health, safety and ethical boundaries, but could also include financial and operating boundaries).
- **Trust**, where the leader trusts employees to act and where the employee is confident of the leader's support.
- **Support**, from the leadership team, especially when an outcome is sub-optimal and where lessons can be learned to improve performance and grow the confidence of the employee.

In conclusion, while today's awful C19 circumstances have necessitated remote working in many businesses, some of history's greatest leaders have overcome huge challenges to their organisations through adopting enduring leadership behaviours. They have stayed connected with everyone and given purpose to their organisation. In so doing they have created **awareness** of purpose among its people, raised morale and created a **desire** to succeed, given the necessary **knowledge** and **ability** to succeed, and finally **reinforced** their belief throughout the journey. Arguably, a commercial variant of Mission Command, which states the leader's intent and empowers people to use their initiative to achieve it, remains a powerful commercial tool. And yes, the digital bonnet can be just as effective as the physical one!