

Best of the best leadership

Margaret Beaton 27 April 2012

Over the years I have come to learn that outstanding leaders share several core beliefs and behaviours about people, organisations and their role. Many, many books and countless blog posts have been written on this subject so, well may ask, should I be adding to this mountain?

I am doing so because my perspective is one born of working with hundreds of top leaders in intensely knowledge-based enterprises. These super-intelligent leaders (I've not counted but I estimate at least a quarter have PhDs) also tend to have very large egos. So one would imagine as leaders they exercise this combination by dazzling their staff with brilliant instructions.

But in the best leaders I know the patterns of belief and their behaviours are not this way at all. Here's what I observed. I hope it helps you.

Organisations are communities, not machines. Exceptional leaders view their firm or department as a living network of aspirations, needs and concerns, woven together by shared values and a common vision. And for which they will go the extra mile. There are no cogs or rigid rules in these places, just norms and peer expectations.

Vision, not fear, motivates. Extraordinary leaders inspire people to see a better future and how they'll be a part of it. These leaders paint a picture that helps their people see a motivating, secure future—with which they can align themselves. As a result, staff give of their discretionary effort, enjoying their work, their colleagues and the rewards that flow. These leaders do not threaten, but this is not to say tough conversations don't occur with them.

Management serves, it does not control. Jan Carlzon, legendary CEO of Scandinavian Airlines wrote that he saw himself as the servant of his staff. So it is with all great leaders. They set a direction and ensure the resources are available to get the work done. They delegate. They don't tell. And they don't allow 'upward delegation'.

My colleagues, not my children. Extraordinary leaders treat everyone as if he or she is the most important person in the firm. Excellence is expected everywhere, from the reception to the executive committee. Self-management is expected and facilitated. There is no lack of trust with these leaders—and sometimes this comes at a cost. But they learn to see these challenges earlier—and pre-empt failure.

Change is the norm, not unwelcome. Change is viewed as a necessary part of organisational life and success is only possible new ideas and new ways of doing business are embraced. Nothing is seen as too complicated or threatening to the current order.

The organisation is an ecosystem, not a battle ground. Exceptional leaders understand symbiosis and see their firm as a living system. They foster diversity, knowing it will assure survival and prosperity. Their teams form, dissolve and re-form in response to new challenges. Suppliers and customers are seen as partners. These leaders have Steven Covey's mentality of 'abundance'.

This post was written by Dr [Margaret Beaton](#), a director of [Beaton Executive Coaching](#) and [Beaton Research + Consulting](#). You can also find Margaret on [LinkedIn](#).