'Forward Thinking' Article for PROMPT on Leadership: Jim Price, MadAbout

Leaders either get what they want - or they get what they deserve.

There is a widely held belief that an organisation would have few, if any, problems if only the employees would do their jobs correctly. In fact, the key to successful improvements more often lies in changes within the system where the work is done. The leader is a key part of that system. For example, a receptionist cannot 'put the customer first' if their manager or supervisor puts 'balancing the till' above the needs of the customer.

Leadership by common sense is not really leadership.

How many times has someone said to you "just use your common sense", leaving you to walk away wondering what you should actually do, but unable to seek clarity for fear of admitting you don't have any common sense? Contrary to popular belief, there isn't too little common sense in business, there's too much! Of course you have common sense; your common sense is common to you. Whenever anyone asks "why didn't you just use your common sense?" What they are actually asking is "why didn't you do it the way I would've done it?"

So this leads us to the first of our key leadership tips - have a clear PURPOSE. You wouldn't get into the car and drive off without knowing where you were headed and why. You would also be able to measure your progress along the way, through time or distance.   Often, even if the leader has clarity, their teams don't or don't understand what part they play: "I want my organisation to be more successful - that's just common sense isn't it?"

Start your PURPOSE thought process with a strong VISION. How will your work benefit the world? What will you give your customers that is aspirational? Successful organisations have outwardly facing visions, those that are customer-centric. "To be the number one in the industry" is not as customer centric as "Deliver a world class experience" which focuses the organisation on what it exists to deliver. This clear purpose enables employees to make key decisions: "which of these options will deliver a world class experience to our customers?"

Bringing us to the second key leadership tip - create a culture of AUTONOMY. A vital element in staff motivation and engagement is the feeling of control over ones destiny, the ability to influence what we spend our time doing. Strong leaders have a clear and unwavering belief in their vision and team's purpose but then allow the people who work with them to define HOW this will be achieved. Effective autonomy delivers two major elements needed to get people doing things that deliver results for the organisation: INVOLVEMENT and PINPOINTING.

With involvement, much has been written on the skill of coaching and in simple terms it boils down to just one question the leader should ask "how do you want to go about achieving this?"

Pinpointing is the vital art of being absolutely clear in what somebody is being asked to DO or SAY to deliver results. Not only does this give clarity and confidence to the person, it also gives the leader a clear behaviour to measure and reinforce. Of course, the more involvement a person has in the things they should say and do, the more autonomy they feel, the more engaged they are in the task. Is it making sense yet?

Leading us to our third and final key leadership tip - MASTERY. Mastery is the feeling of improvement, that we are getting better at something. Think of the hours, weeks, months that are spent by people practicing a musical instrument. Sure, some of these will be focused on earning a living or receiving some applause from it, but how many do it for the pure pleasure of being 'slightly better than yesterday'? The team's leader should ensure that everyone in the team knows what they do that is adding value to the team's purpose, and when they do more of it, they receive some form of reinforcement so they will do even more of it.

Leaders are best defined during their absence.

So by now you are probably wondering if you have it, are you an effective leader? Does your leadership style bring out the best in your team? The simplest way to measure this is to find out what happens when you're not there.

If the performance of the team goes UP, then is there a chance that you are doing something that gets in the way of the team being as effective as it could be? Do you have an open door policy? Does this mean people come to ask you questions they are quite able to solve without you? Are they fearful of making mistakes? Do they genuinely have AUTONOMY?

If the performance of the team goes DOWN in your absence, does this mean they only deliver to satisfy you, or to avoid your immediate wrath if they don't? School pupils keep their heads down and get on with their work when the teacher is present, if we remove the teacher; more 'fun' behaviour takes place.

If the performance of the team REMAINS THE SAME then you can pat yourself on the back. It probably means that they are clear with what they have to do and find the work itself rewarding in some way. They get something from it and don't rely on you for their reinforcement. Everyone is self-motivating in the right environment. Effective leaders control the team's environment and adapt their leadership 'style' according to the needs of each team member and the work they do.