

# 21st Century Leaders Journey

As employees' expectations and working environment change, the modern era requires new approaches and ideas. *By Richard Coles*

**L**eadership, writes James Autry in his book 'World Class Leaders': 'is about creating an environment that fosters a sense of community that helps people to love their work instead of doing their job, which when done honestly creates trust and enhances creativity.'

Today, 'the enemies' of business leaders take on many guises. The technological adversary, who like a chimera, changes shape and direction, rapidly forcing constant change; the never-ending stream of competitors who all claim to do things faster, better and cheaper; the manpower supply enemy that fiercely competes for the best and ablest brains; the customer who constantly demands improved products and services and time which competes for the energy and resources of every successful firm.

While the adversaries may have changed their forms, the ways to

overcome the many challenges to businesses today, have developed in sophistication with the adoption of modern management techniques.

Business leaders today need to be visionary, charismatic, pragmatic and realistic in order to match changing times and circumstances. Their skills have had to be honed in order to envision, energise, and empower their staff to achieve more in shorter time spans, embrace total quality management, and love what they are doing. Thus the major tasks of today's business leaders are centered on creating and maintaining high levels of motivation and job satisfaction in their workforces.

There is a challenge to make the work meaningful to employees at all levels. The old values of management are becoming less and less relevant in today's climate where technological and social changes produce a workforce who prefers to agree rather than obey.

This in turn requires a style of management leaning towards helping people to do their jobs better, as well as towards development and growth. We need to collaborate and cooperate more.

Management today involves operating in an environment of ever improving communication systems requiring faster and more accurate decision making.

## A complex issue

More communication are not always better communication so, those in the team are still expecting time for face to face communication. Working under such circumstance forces the manager to be often torn between the pressures of exerting 'strong' leadership on the one hand, and allowing participative methods on the other. An approach of 'situational leadership' is needed more than ever.

One thing is for sure; leadership is a complex issue when exercised by the individual. It is a combination of organising and motivating, setting goals and controlling through effective communication, while giving people confidence in what they are doing. The confidence given by the manager to his team develops through giving value to their jobs, as an individual, and as a team.

The success of managers as leaders depends, primarily, on their ability to communicate to all the people for whom they are responsible. There is a necessity to convey what they need and the

importance of doing it. It involves the acceptance of change, the commitment to customer services (internally and externally), the achievement of more with less, and eventually the harnessing of experience, personal skill and training to generate development.

Failures in communication are costly. If a manager does not relay the problem to the team, they work in the same mode and inadvertently maintain that problem believing it is the right method of operation. This costs the organisation money and change becomes difficult as it then involves personalities and not systems.

**"Management today involves operating in an environment of ever improving communication systems requiring faster and more accurate decision making."**

However, where there is change, full benefits can only be achieved when there is an adequate communication system for explaining face to face, directly to employees, what is required and why. This develops interaction and teamwork, so allowing everyone to work towards a common goal. Such communication results in greater productivity through more effective work and greater co-operation.

There is no monopoly of wisdom at the top of organisations. We cannot afford to waste ideas and inventiveness of employees at any level. The way present new

employees have been trained at school, university and indeed training programmes is probably through involvement.

They therefore expect to be involved in the workplace, and people need to understand what they have to do and why; how they are performing against budgets and targets set, and what their conditions of employment are. Work needs to be stretching, meaningful and providing growth for the individual.

## Major shift

Effective leaders are always a privilege to watch. They are charismatic, and can be amazing with motivating employee performance. Whether it is business communication skills or employee inter-personal relationships, successful leaders are charmers. They inspire people to exceed their self-imposed limitations and reach success.

The celebrated leaders of the 20th century were people who followed the path of knowledge and facts. This era belonged to lawyers, engineers, accountants, doctors, high-flying business executives. These people were leaders whose leadership skills were centered on knowledge.

Now in the 21st Century, there is a major shift in the definitions of good leadership skills. Knowledge is still important – and it will always be – but it is no longer enough. Now leaders combine knowledge and facts with gut feelings, superior communication skills, ingenuity, intuition, insights, inspiration, and instinct.

Some leaders of yesterday did not always take kindly to criticism; did not welcome change, did not know how to balance flawed and perfect workforce. Today's leaders work a lot on gut feelings and intuition; they work with ingenuity and personal


rapport.

Today's leaders come with the ability to balance the hard knowledge-based facts and soft skills. Very often today demands that the 21st Century leader move between the tangible and intangible such as logic and vision, making rules and breaking rules, head and heart, rational and emotional.

This is not easy; for today's leaders are required to judge and act more flexibly than ever before for the future is and will remain unpredictable. The soft skills here are intuition, gut feeling, heart, empathy, and ingenuity – all factors that cannot normally be taught in a classroom. Good communication skills are becoming an important factor when the leader starts his journey to success.

Risk-taking, innovative approach, intuitive decisions become the order of the day for the 21st

Century leader. Though motivating employee performance is still one of the most important roles of the leader, equally important is his ability to take risk, adapt to change, create and manage change.

Business communication skills and leadership are intertwined and require continuous attunement for the rules keep changing. Ability to adapt to change is best not when you anticipate change, but when you are part of the change. Hence, today's leaders and their teams need to be part of the change. The journey continues. 

Richard Coles is the Principal Trainer and Consultant of Coles International Training and Corporate Consultancy. Based in the Gulf, Australia and now covering Asia. It researches, develops and delivers learning and organisational solutions to client's needs and problems around the world. For more information, please visit [www.colestraining.com](http://www.colestraining.com), or email [colestraining@gmail.com](mailto:colestraining@gmail.com).





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