

The Privilege of Leadership

A few weeks ago I spoke to a long standing colleague who had recently moved into a new role in a different organisation. His first few months had been something of a shock. Just weeks into his new role he was told by his head office to cut costs and headcount in the face of the economic downturn, and far from looking forward to developing the business and taking it to new heights, he was seen as a hatchet man brought in by head office to decimate a successful business.

“That’s the privilege of being a leader” I said in response to his rather sorry tale of woe. “I’m not sure being a leader is a privilege at the moment!” was his retort, and it started me thinking. Leadership comes with three principal components: power; accountability; and responsibility and that latter component is nowhere more important than in dealing with people. It is here that the privilege of leadership really comes into play.

Perhaps the starting point is to look at a not untypical approach to leadership. Back in 1960, Douglas McGregor hypothesised that people were either Theory X or Theory Y. Theory X people came to work to do as little as possible and had to be controlled, measured and cajoled to work, while Theory Y people naturally sought to do the best they could and simply needed to be guided. Of course the theory is bunkum (to quote Henry Ford) as people don’t fit into neat little boxes, but leaders often treat people as though they do. Some time ago I read of a business leader called Randy McGurk who led a business that had a chain of fast food restaurants in the South West of the United States. His approach was the “2% Jerk Factor”. Believing that most of his team of assorted cooks, waitresses, and cleaners wanted to do a good job, he argued that he should base his approach around them, not the 2% of his team who were “jerks”. His experience was that if he treated people well, they responded accordingly, thus disproving Theory X/Y. Incidentally he also found that the 2% of jerks didn’t last very long as his employees quickly made it clear what was expected of them, and he didn’t have to resort to complicated and prescriptive performance management policies and procedures! However if a leader treats all his employees as Theory X they will appear to be exactly that. So there’s no such thing as Theory X/Y people, only Theory X/Y leaders.

So where does privilege come into this equation? Well go back to the responsibility that comes with leadership. The greatest responsibility that a leader has is for people. But what about bottom line profit I hear you cry! Yes of course that is a leader’s responsibility, but he or she doesn’t actually produce that. Leaders guide, direct, command, produce policies and make deals, but rarely actually produce hard cash. It is the employees who do that. So if a leader wants to increase bottom line profit, or growth, or shareholder return, they need people to do that for them. Without talented people to deliver the product, all of the leader’s best endeavours will come to nought. The greatest privilege a person can be given is the care of other people. The RSPCA run a campaign that goes along the lines of “A dog is for life, not just for Christmas” and so it is with people. Employees are for the good and bad times and a leader’s prime responsibility is to ensure that they are engaged, have the tools, skills and freedom to give of their best (Theory Y) and are then supported. In good times and

bad, if employees feel that they are supported they will continually surprise and delight you with their talents and efforts.

There's a simple formula in terms of performance.

$$\textit{Performance} = \textit{Potential} + \textit{Support} - \textit{Interference}$$

A leader's responsibility is to maximise the support and minimise the interference whether in good times or in bad. It is at times going to seem like a thankless task as my colleague found last year, but it goes with the territory. Being given the privilege of guiding, directing, liberating, and at times controlling the work destiny of others is the greatest privilege a person can be afforded. Perhaps we should all remember that privilege!

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