

Leaders – The Good – The Bad – and the Downright Ugly!

Back in 450BC, Lao Tsu the philosopher was credited with this quotation:

“Of the best leaders, when the job is done, they will say, we did it ourselves.”

It remains the most insightful of all the leadership quotations I have seen in all my study. Warren Bennis, the American leadership guru said that “leadership is the most studied and least understood of all the social sciences” and judging from the examples of failed businesses and poor leadership we have seen of late he was right. So, given that we are all leaders – if only of ourselves – how can we ensure that we are the good, and not the bad and certainly not the ugly!

Going back to Lao Tsu, I believe that his quotation still offers the best insight into leadership even in these troubled times. Sadly though, commentators (and even some academics) still argue for **“strong”** leadership. Yet the strong leadership we have experienced over the last 10 or so years (striving for greater and greater profit, running campaigns to “attack” overseas markets, driving costs out of business, dictating internal processes and so on) is the leadership that we now see paraded before us every time another enterprise goes to the wall – and of course every time we look at The Apprentice, Sir Alan re-inforces that stereotype. But surely what we need is effective and appropriate leadership – which granted may be strong, but it could also be affiliative, inspirational, supportive, caring – indeed any number of adjectives.

Returning to Lao Tsu, the key is in the last phrase that he uses “we did it ourselves”. There was a time when the British workforce was laughingly referred to as “the best in the world except between 9 and 5!” – a damnation not of the workforce but of the leaders. Just as the British Army in the First World War was described as “lions led by donkeys” (I think by the then Kaiser), so we have the opportunity by our actions as leaders to completely devalue the potential of those who work for and with us. Rather than seeing ourselves as leaders sitting on top of the organisation, we should see ourselves as sitting below our employees, supporting them in their efforts to provide world class customer service, production, innovation and so on. If we can find the way to allow everyone in our team to release the inherent and infinite capability that everyone has, then we really will enable world class performance. To do that though we have to get rid of our ego and look at our leadership role in a totally different way. If we still think of ourselves as the most important link in the chain, we will inevitably conspire to limit the performance of our team.

To be the good we need to give all of our team freedom - within the constraints of business strategy of course – so that they can really perform. To be the bad, we simply need to get in their way and limit their potential. To be the downright ugly, tell people what to do, when to do, and how to do, but never why and what they have to achieve. Do that and they’ll simply do what they are told and no more. Really want to be the best – enable your staff to say “we did it ourselves!”.