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HOW TO BE A TRUE LEADER THROUGH COMPLEXITY



By
B&T MAGAZINE

BRYAN WHITEFIELD (PICTURED BELOW) IS A MANAGEMENT CONSULTANT AND THE AUTHOR OF *WINNING CONVERSATIONS: HOW TO TURN RED TAPE INTO BLUE RIBBON*. IN THIS GUEST POST, WHITEFIELD OUTLINES THE SKILL SETS REQUIRED TO BE A SUCCESSFUL LEADER IN THESE EVER-CHANGING AND CHALLENGING TIMES...

At the extremes of complexity it is only the brilliant and gifted minds of mathematicians or musicians that can comprehend what is before them. In between is the domain of talented leaders across government who have learned to embrace complexity. They have done the hard-smart work.



It means that what is complex to one person may well be someone else's bread and butter. Not because of their gift, because of their effort.

A perfect example is a chemical plant with all its pipes, pumps and reactors as it churns out the beginnings of what will become our fuel, our household cleaners and that new outdoor lounge you purchased last week. From the outside looking in, a chemical plant looks horrifyingly complex to many people. Not to an engineer or scientist.

The opposite is true for an engineer or scientist looking into the machinery of government. They see extreme complexity. In their world they have the irrefutable laws of physics and chemistry to set boundaries. In government there are ill-defined boundaries as policy makers, advisers and implementers find themselves at the vagaries of human preference. Preferences which change as the winds change. Career politicians and bureaucrats are comfortable in this environment.

This means that complexity can be embraced to achieve unique outcomes. However, it takes leadership to embrace complexity. And it takes leaders with a unique blend of business acumen, scientific endeavour and imaginative thinking.

Business Acumen

Leaders that have sound business acumen can see the relationships, the motivations and the inevitable biases that creep into people's decision making. They know how to build trust, to be decisive when needed and consultative when not and to be calm and be able to hold a room when the moment calls for it.

While some are born with business acumen and achieve in business at a young age, most develop it over time.

Those who have learned to expedite the process have taken to networking, study and reading broadly and often. They voice their opinion and welcome it being challenged.

Scientific Endeavour

Leaders that embrace the most positive attributes of scientific endeavour, experimentation and evaluation, make smart and fast decisions. Through experimentation they take calculated risks which allow them to fail, examine and to try again and again and again.

In the absence of these core attributes of scientific endeavour leaders are relying too much on their gut. Science has proven time and time again that gut can only be relied on if you have tens of thousands of hours of experience about the decision you are making behind you. The rest of the time your gut is at high risk of influence by your own unconscious biases.

The difference between a leader that embraces the attributes of scientific endeavour and a gut instinct leader is that the latter is surprised by failure and the former is grateful for what they learned from their experiment.

Imaginative Thinking

Imaginative thinking is critical for leading through complexity. A common theme when anyone explores complexity is the effect of networks. Their interconnectivity means anything from unexpected areas of vulnerability affecting the entire network to unexpected outcomes in one part of the network from a change made in another part.

Our world is now uber networked. Made up of more than seven billion nodes called humans where choices made in one part of our world have ramifications way beyond borders. Similarly the modern organisation is more networked than ever before. It is easily disrupted from internal vulnerabilities or external shock. And it is equally capable of producing remarkable results if the network is allowed to thrive.

Organisations with leaders with a vivid imagination who can see the infinite possibilities for the organisation are the ones that will thrive in complexity.

Some leaders are natural visionaries. For others their vivid imagination can be brought to life with creative thinking tools and techniques.

Creative Leadership

Together business acumen, scientific endeavour and imaginative thinking form creative leadership. A creative leader can see through complexity and identify pathways for their talented teams of people to explore. They provide their teams with a focus on specific achievable goals that will collectively lead to the future they have foreseen.

Each component of creative leadership requires effort. It is a rarity to be naturally gifted in all three. At its essence, creative leadership is about doing the hard-smart work that others won't.

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