

What's your biggest resource as a leader in accomplishing your goals?

Today I was reminded how critical it is for leaders, when laying out exciting new strategic direction and growth plans to their global organisations, to have compassion for where the stakeholders and teams are coming from, not just on where they as leaders want them to go. Where the leadership team wants the organisation to go and has formulated strategic goals and specific initiatives to reach them is all very well and necessary. That all provides clarity through a shared vision and sense of purpose, a destination and clarity around how to get there.

Yet leaders often focus on highlighting the importance of the target and how fantastic it will be if we can achieve it, sometimes at the expense of acknowledging where the team are starting from, because they want their people to set their sights high and to believe more is possible than they may initially imagine. Why does this matter? It is tempting to rein in questions from the team about where we are now and how will we be able to get from here to there, as if these are the voices of doubt, because as leaders we want to maintain a visionary mindset directed towards the exciting future we want to build, rather than risk getting sidelined by more limited ambition.

Setting sights high is a necessary and important part of preparing the team for extraordinary and out of the box ambition and action, which can produce extraordinary results when the conversations are inspiring and well facilitated. Yet an important part of the process of engagement is hearing what people are concerned about, as well as what excites them about our strategic goals. Skate over their concerns at your peril!

Otherwise, without a proper and committed listening from the leadership towards all of the feedback from the team and stakeholders, not just to the parts the leadership wants to focus on, the team and stakeholders may feel ignored or overlooked. When that happens, they may become resistant and raise more questions amplifying the possible pitfalls they see, than if the leadership team had created a real opportunity for the concerns to be heard first time around. Worse still, the lack of a sense of being listened to may be a turn-off for the team and stakeholders, who eventually lose interest altogether and fall silent. That kills implementation stone dead.

I was hearing a scenario along these lines from a new client this morning, a leader whose global organisation are working to create alignment on their strategy across their different stakeholder groups. The leadership team are frustrated at the lack of understanding shown by some stakeholders about the level of resources needed to develop a strong enough value proposition and central benefits to attract more firms to come on board. More firms are needed, partly to generate sufficient revenue to fund the creation of new central benefits. Yet, without having the central benefits in place, it is challenging to attract new firms. A classic catch-22 situation.

We delved into different ways of seeing the challenges, the likely motivations of different stakeholders and the leadership for the direction they are taking, my client's own motivation for the direction he is taking. He talked about the challenges of trying to get everyone on board with the global strategy when there are so many different positions. I asked him what it would be like to start looking from where the stakeholders are and imagining what they see. There was silence and after a few moments he said: "so that's a completely different way of looking at it. I can see if I'm trying to start over here and they're a long way over there, it makes it difficult to build alignment when there's such a gap".

This was one of his main insights that he shared at the end of the session which had really helped. Starting from where people are, rather than from where you think they should be, is likely to help drive action more effectively. Stakeholders and teams will experience being listened to and taken seriously if leaders meet them where they currently are. As my client put it: "it maybe doesn't have to be a constant battle to get the stakeholders onto my page, instead I can try to get myself onto theirs."

Coaching is all about listening and enabling clients to gain different perspectives on their challenges, to realise that there is always more than one way to do something and to be aware of when they are wedded to one particular way. That sense of struggle that comes when there seems to be only one way forward, can start to disappear when clients see that their way is a possible way but not the only one. And it's not just a logical realisation because they already see that logically.

The deeper insight comes when they are prepared to consider that that heaviness they feel and "constant battle" is a sign telling them something, a physical signal that they may have become blind sighted in their thinking, attached to doing things in one way only. When they get to experience that, the horizon opens up and suddenly they are able to move forward again and see different possibilities than before.

Another insight my client related at the end of the session had helped him was after asking him "what's your greatest resource in leading in your role and at the same time the thing that most gets in the way?" As we explored this he got to see that his deep experience in his sector doing a similar role before to the one he has now is a double-edged sword: seen one way his past experience is really useful as a reference to guide him in how to run another such organisation. Yet, no two organisations are the same. Each organisation has its own distinct context, founding commitment, people, corporate DNA, unique opportunities and challenges.

What works in one organisational context doesn't always fit when applied to a similar looking challenge in another organisation. Successful strategic solutions from one professional environment don't necessarily transplant well to another, however similar the challenges may appear. Cherish your past career experience and use it where it's useful. Let it inform your thinking but not limit it. Recognise it is not a



panacea for solving your current challenges – what got you to here will not necessarily get you to there.

Thank you for reading this far. It's a privilege for me to do this work and be a trusted coach and consultant to my clients.

I provide one to one and team coaching for leaders and their organisations. If something particular resonates in what I've outlined here and you would like to check out what support options could be helpful for you and your team, please get in touch.