

Courageous leadership – what defines it in the modern organisation

Mandy Chapman

Abstract

Purpose – *It is important to challenge the popular image of courageous leadership, which in the public imagination is inextricably interlinked with the exercise of power and authority. People often paint a picture in their mind of somebody who knows all the answers and can drive and communicate decisions through their own sense of certainty and will. In nearly every case, especially in an HR context, that is a false picture.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This paper looks to highlight that the best leaders are in fact often those that do not make all the decisions, do not have all the right answers and are prepared to admit that. It takes great strength to admit vulnerability and acknowledge that you do not know everything.*

Findings – *The paper highlights that it is important to have a vision and give direction, but it is genuinely courageous to turn to the intelligent teams you have within the organisation and draw on their help.*

Originality/value – *The paper takes a distinctive stance on the question of courageous leadership, arguing that good leadership is about acknowledging what you do not know and reaching out to your people to fill in the gaps, and it is also about learning when to move on. Being able to acknowledge when you can add little further value to the business and allow someone else to take the reins is perhaps, in senior leadership, the most courageous act of all.*

Keywords Leadership, Communication, Team management

Paper type Viewpoint

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Introduction

The popular image of courageous leadership is inextricably interlinked with the exercise of power and authority. People often paint a picture in their mind of somebody who knows all the answers and can drive and communicate decisions through their own sense of certainty and will. In nearly every case, especially in an HR context, that is a false picture.

The best leaders are in fact often those that do not make all the decisions, do not have all the right answers and are prepared to admit that. It takes great strength to admit vulnerability and acknowledge that you do not know everything. Some leaders balk at this because it can seem to them like they are pushing away their responsibility and accountability. In reality, that could not be further from the truth. The mature response is often to delegate. After all, no single person can ever have all the answers. No individual should ever make all the big decisions for their organisation in isolation. Rather than seeking to give the impression to staff that they know all the answers – when asked a question they do not have a response to – courageous leaders should instead say, “I do not know the answer to your question”. And perhaps ask, “What do you think?”

Turning the question around in that way is not a cop out. What it is actually saying, by implication is, “I do not know everything. I am not perfect. I do not have all the answers. I make mistakes. I need your expertise to make sure we do the right thing”. That can seem

alien for any manager to say, but it comes very close to the definition of courageous leadership for me.

Letting others take the reins

It is certainly important to have a vision and to give direction, but it is genuinely courageous, in spite of that, to turn to the intelligent teams you have within the organisation and draw on their help.

Rather than being about pushing their responsibility or accountability away, being bold enough to share that responsibility is a sign that leaders have genuine confidence and trust in those working for them.

Leaders should have a broad understanding of the direction they want the organisation to go in and should make that clear to their employees through vision and purpose, but they also need to provide a space for people to feel comfortable challenging and bringing ideas to the centre. In the modern organisation, decision-making should be enterprise wide, and it should be collaborative. Rather than being forcibly driven forward, organisations should be pulsing and moving in the same direction because everybody working there is truly aligned to and working for a common purpose. Leaders have a huge part to play in supporting that movement, instead of dictating the route.

Again, it is that ability to share responsibility that is often the key. Trying to take on too much yourself is actually a real weakness. It shows a lack of trust in staff and can often lead to burn out. It can often lead to a sense among staff that their views do not matter and that you as a leader are never really there for them.

Environments where leaders brook no dissension can also quickly become toxic because people do not feel they have a voice. They do not feel trusted. They are parented. And that is when horrible cultures emerge, where leaders think they have all the answers when they do not and employees feel disenfranchised because they have no power to move anything forward themselves.

The inverse of that is where you do have courageous leaders that do have a clear vision of where they want to get to but do not dictate the path they take. They do not charge people with tasks. Instead, they encourage them, and they use the intelligence within the organisation to help them come up with the right answers and the right way of moving forward, being genuinely curious about what that might be and allowing other people to drive it. They are prepared to listen to people and acknowledge and respect their strengths, and they feel informed enough to make a judgement call and tap into that expertise and understanding to guide decision-making where appropriate. Courageous leaders certainly provide overall direction, but they also provide a space for people to achieve their goals together.

Why technology has a role to play

In a modern organisation, technology often has a vital role to play in supporting and facilitating courageous leadership. It is frequently the key in giving leaders a real insight into what is happening within the organisation and looking at what employees have done and are able to do in the future.

With the latest technology, the kind of management information leaders need to make good decisions is often available, but courageous leadership is all about having the commitment to analyse it and then the strength to act on it. That is not always easy, but there is a multitude of possible applications for this in the workplace. One area where data and analytics are being commonly applied is in employee well-being but not in its traditional sense. If one individual is regularly working a 60 hour week, for example, or a single

department is doing large amounts of overtime on a regular basis, it is important that this information is reviewed at an executive level to spot trends and identify root causes. A strong leader needs to not only be aware of this but also ensure that they integrate this kind of information as a key performance indicator (KPI) within leadership dashboards. They need to move beyond revenue and profitability and start looking at the health and well-being of their people. But this is about much more than just analysis, leaders will also need to have the courage to act on what they find – and act quickly. If there is a clear correlation between that data and employee churn, then the need to look at the figures carefully will become even more urgent.

Leaders will need to show even greater courage if the link to unwanted attrition is shown by the data analysis to be more about toxic management than by long hours or high levels of demand. If you have a manager that has been with the business for 20 years and is its best sales person, but department data shows that overall they are failing and losing staff (in some cases, creating a massive turnover in employees), then it will take courage to look at the data, have the right conversations and perhaps make some tough decisions. That may include dealing with weak leadership. There may also be mental health or personal issues at play, so the need to tread carefully and balance “tough” decisions with duty of care is vital.

Harnessing modern technology to identify hidden skills in an organisation is also something that courageous leaders do well. A team member who has hidden language skills in one jurisdiction may be incredibly useful to another part of the organisation. Without linking skills data to the requirements of the organisation, resourcing roles and projects can be very difficult. Really understanding the “whole person” working for you can also motivate the workforce as people are seen as more than just their job, but it can also reduce attrition, as roles and career paths are generated on current and developing skills, career aspirations and areas of genuine interest for employees.

Why bold leaders should be inquisitive

Another characteristic of courageous leadership is curiosity; it is the ability to listen to your people and be genuinely interested in what you hear and be open to changing your opinion or direction. In an HR context, that could be about getting employees to highlight their issues and concerns from “lip service” working from home policies and presenteeism to locked stationery cupboards, all indicating a severe lack of trust. The most successful leaders look at these issues and make changes that not only help employees but also benefit the bottom line. As HR professionals, the need to commercialise the change where possible is critical. Reducing time spent by people in the office resulting in reduced rental and electricity costs is a good case in point. But leaders should also be tuning in to the ideas and creativity within their organisations – people have amazing minds, and it is often in the strangest places that we find the most interesting perspectives and ideas. There are many examples of this innovation in successful businesses. Take Mars, for example, that introduced “Celebrations” chocolates – essentially mini chocolate bars in a box – after the idea was raised by a worker on the production line.

Looking ahead

In summary then, there is still a distinctive lack of courageous leadership impacting many organisations today. However, leaders are starting to realise that they do not need to have all the answers and that good leadership is about acknowledging what you do not know and reaching out to your people to fill in the gaps. It is about being a mentor and guiding your teams to do great things. Finally, it is also perhaps about learning when to move on. Being able to acknowledge when you can add little further value to the business and allow someone else to take the reins is perhaps, in senior leadership, the most courageous act of all.

About the author

Mandy Chapman has 19 years' experience in delivering value to HR teams through HR and payroll technology implementation and process improvement. Having worked with some of the UK's biggest names in retail, public sector, higher education, central government and professional services, Mandy has a diverse and proven track record in driving practical and positive changes in HR operations, helping organisations to streamline their ways of working and to drive improved service to their employees.

With detailed knowledge across the HR functions, Mandy has a rare ability to cut through the status quo and challenge organisations to rethink their ways of doing things and focussing them on getting the basics right while embarking on strategic people management initiatives.

A trusted advisor to HR leaders and practitioners, Mandy finds creative and tailored solutions to help HR teams to deliver their people strategies in the most effective ways.

With detailed and wide-ranging knowledge of the HR technology market, Mandy can cut through the sales "fog" and impartially guide customers through the range of tools available to best meet their business needs. Mandy is passionate about ensuring her clients are fully mobilised and prepared for the job of embracing and getting the best out of their new HR technology. With particular expertise in Cloud procurement, implementation and adoption, Mandy can prevent organisations from falling prey to common pitfalls by providing tools to ensure robust benefits measurement and realisation.

An engaging facilitator and speaker, Mandy is trusted to get to the root of organisational, process and technology issues and draw out tangible solutions "in the moment".

Having worked for both client-side and supplier-side, Mandy has found her niche advising clients from within the HR function, bringing to bear her extensive knowledge and accelerating value to the business. Mandy Chapman can be contacted at: mandy.chapman@hrcubed.co.uk

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