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Leadership? Brexit, the wrong example.

All modern leadership and management courses will teach you that to be an effective leader you need to communicate and consult widely with shareholders, employees and, importantly, your customers. But, can there ever be too much consultation? Too much listening? Too much support seeking? Maybe, in the leader's mind, fear takes hold and consultation is used as a way of avoiding making a key decision and getting it wrong.

The recent Brexit issue raised a serious concern with me. As the story goes, back in 2013, David Cameron was experiencing a great deal of internal pressure from within his own party to exit the European Union. Unchecked immigration and the inability to act independently were seen as the big ticket items. To placard his support and put the issue to bed (he hoped) he decided to go to the UK public with a referendum and in essence, let them decide. Wow! This was not a question on a new flag design or the colour mix n match for the English Olympic team's Rio uniform – important issues in their own right but quite small mash in terms of economic importance. The UK public or any public for that matter, with all of their combined intellectual power, will not have the necessary skill set to fully understand the machinations of the global financial markets and the critical detail on how the world machine works. And as we all know, our representatives, our politicians, always sell issues in fluffy hyperboles with very little supporting detail that the average layperson can understand. So, why is the key decision maker on the very important issue of EU membership, left to the outcome of public referendum? The post mortem of Brexit is starting to show that many voters voted leave/remain purely on a single issue affecting them, here and now – quite a number, racially motivated. And what of contingency plans – are there any? Surely, this is not the way for decision making on key issues.

Leaders are elected to lead. They have the skill set to fulfill this role. They understand the issues of their organisation and if they don't, they find out. And they lead by setting a vision with short and long term goals, underpinned by well-thought-out strategic plans – plans which model in detail how each objective and the vision will be achieved. They develop trust, communicate and garner support, all the while committed to their vision. Unfounded opinion, no matter how popular, will not sway them.

As a leader, you need to understand where you want the organisation to go, its long-term vision, what will it look like in 5, 10 and 20 years from now. How you get there is the next key discipline to master. These are some of the steps:

1. Vision broken down to short, medium and long-term objectives.
2. Understand the issues. Communication and consultation at all levels. Seeking expert advice. Integrate these into your plans.
3. Model your plans. "Role Play" your organisation through each of the steps in the plan. What does the P&L look like each year? Does it hold together? What are the risks? What are the contingency plans?
4. Communicate your plans in terms understood by all – in sufficient detail so all levels of your organisation understand the steps, the risks and rewards these plans will bring. Be open. Great leaders will impart understanding and inspire to recruit support.
5. Act. Decisively.
6. Review constantly, consult, and adjust. Bring everyone along. Ensure a regular communication plan. Never be afraid to adjust or even take on a new direction.

In leadership the onus of responsibility is great. Opportunities, challenges and decisions come in many shapes and sizes with a diverse array of risks and rewards. Equip yourself with the skill set and importantly, a great support crew. But, ultimately, leaders always captain their ships.

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