



The perfect 'sustainable' leader

If there ever was such a thing as the perfect leader then amongst their considerable attributes, they'd also have their eye on sustainability, says Jenny Charteris. She explains the qualities the perfect 'green' leader should have.

The most successful leaders plan for long-term success. But the sustainable development agenda is changing the definition of 'long-term success', and leaders are beginning to realise that this places different demands on them.

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Sustainable development means taking into account the social, economic and environmental impact of business activities, not only for the present but also for future generations. Taking sustainability seriously means that leaders need to be responsive to the needs of a wide range of stakeholders and communities. This will involve managing competing interests between all stakeholders who have an interest in, or are affected by, the organisation and its actions.

An individual business therefore cannot act alone if acting sustainably. It must collaborate with a number of other businesses, communities and stakeholders in order to achieve results. This collaborative style makes new and different demands on leaders' skills, for which many are ill-equipped.

So what are the skills a leader needs to be collaborative and to manage a business more sustainably?

Intellectual and strategic capacity

Leaders require the intellectual and strategic capacity to process many different perspectives simultaneously and consider them all when making decisions. Ever worked with one of those leaders who are able to get their heads around complex stuff really quickly? Basic, core intellectual calibre does not in itself make for good leadership. However, strong intellectual ability is well known to correlate highly with strategic management ability. Given the increased complexity of managing sustainably, taking intellectual ability into account when recruiting or promoting to senior roles has become more important than ever... despite the fact that in some facets of our society we are uncomfortable with differentiating according to intellectual ability.

Diverse perspectives

Leaders need the will, skill and consultation processes that enable them to genuinely include diverse perspectives in their decision making. Ever known a leader who had no time for others' opinions? Openness to diverse perspectives is less about inherent ability and more about attitude and belief. Leaders who assume their perspective is 'right' or that they have a better understanding of reality than other people are excluding a wealth of insight from their decision makers. Leaders who have humility and inner confidence will genuinely value the way others see the world, and their decisions, based on richer data from a wider range of perspectives, are more likely to be sustainable.

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The skills and capability to engage groups of diverse stakeholders is more of an organisational capability than one which is personal to an individual leader. There are very powerful examples of innovative methods that have brought together members of different communities with different perspectives to shape the future together. However, great conversations between people with differing needs and priorities do not just happen by accident, careful preparation and excellent facilitation are essential to achieving engagement that leads to sustainable decisions.

Emotional intelligence

Leaders must have a certain degree of emotional intelligence in order to be genuinely open to other views, not just their own. Ever come across a leader who has seemed to behave like a selfish adolescent? Emotional intelligence is the underpinning 'substrate' for leading sustainably. It refers to a leader who operates at a level of self awareness and self management such that they are able to 'show up' in good shape, mentally, emotionally and physically, and be at their best in relation to achieving clear outcomes. The alternative is a leader who is emotionally reactive (and this is often linked to being mentally and physically off the boil), as a result of which their actions in the workplace are all focused on meeting their own needs, rather than attending to the needs and perspectives of all key stakeholders in order to achieve business outcomes.

Breadth of vision

Leaders need breadth of vision to think long term and beyond their own immediate geographical and interest areas. Ever had a friend who came back from a trip to a much poorer part of the world and described it a life-changing experience? Leaders who are going to make future-changing decisions need to develop some serious breadth of perspective. This doesn't mean having travelled the globe (after all, too much of that's not good for carbon footprint!). But it does mean being widely read and being influenced by the best thinking around in a variety of disciplines (economics, history, philosophy, anthropology). A standard business school education is far too limited – for that will never take you into the deprived estates where many future employees of our service industries are growing up, or into the impoverished conditions in which your foreign factory workers are surviving, or even into the rough and tumble of real-life political decision making. Leaders need broad horizons for sustainable decision making. This is what it takes to create sustainable enterprises that benefit both shareholders and the wider world for a long time to come.

Jenny Charteris is the managing director of CPCR. Owned and managed independently by its employees, CPCR aims to help its clients flourish. Further information about CPCR can be found at www.cpcr.co.uk