

Ian Marchant, Building leadership competency

I have to start with a confession. Whenever you talk about leadership you have to approach it with a sense of humility because it's such a vast subject and we, we continue to learn. I learn about leadership every day and I cannot possibly do this subject complete justice in the time that I've got. So, please take what I say in that sense of humility. Some of what I talk about is hard-learned lessons. But I'm gonna talk about what I see as four competencies and there are lots of competencies I could focus, but I'm gonna focus on four that I think a leader in any organization needs, but a Christian leader needs particularly.

The first is strategist, the leader has to be the strategist. Now, there are books written just on strategy and I've got a couple of minutes to talk about it. And I think that it's actually, in many ways, a vastly overwritten subject. It's actually I think for many organizations pretty simple. The first thing that you have to set out is the core purpose of the organization, all the parts of the organization, that can be a small organization or a vast organization. But what is its core purpose? And a core purpose needs to be simple, it needs to be about more than just making money, it needs to inspire those people who work for it and touch and evolve with the organization and it needs to be enduring.

The company that I used to be the chief executive of, Scottish and Southern Energy, its core purpose was providing the energy people need in a reliable and sustainable way. A very simple set of words that I can still remember five years after I left. But it was about energy, it was about reliability, it was about sustainability, it was about communities and people. So, it spoke to the organization. So, you have to be clear as a leader; what is the purpose of your organization?

You can look at organizations around the world and see if they have a core purpose. Disney is about making people happy. Nike is about inspiration and innovation for athletes. You can look at organizations and understand their core purpose. Actually, as Christians we have a core purpose. You've got the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19 and 20, that is our core purpose as Christians, but as organizations we have to have a core purpose.

The other half, I think, of strategy is around values, core values. If a core purpose is what you're gonna do values is about how you do it, how you behave as an organization and what values you need to model as a leader. Now, again, organizations have values. My organization that I used to run had the SSE set of values, six values beginning with the letters SSE set. The first one was safety, the fundamental thing when you're dealing with a substance like electricity is to make sure that your people are safe. The last one was teamwork. So, they spelt SSE set, but they guided how the organization behaved internally.

A company I'm involved in now say, Aggreko, their four values are be dynamic, be expert, be together and be innovative. There isn't a right set of values in an organization, but you need to be clear what they are. The company I chair, Wood Group, has recently made a very large acquisition, it's doubled the size of the workforce. So, they're currently involved in resetting the values and using that as a unifying force around the company.

So again, as Christians we have a value set. A pretty good one is what you read in Galatians 5:22, the fruits of the spirit, love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, not a bad set of values. But you can apply values to your organization so wherever you find yourself as a leader and you're faced with that strategy question of, what are we gonna do, what's our core purpose and what are our values? And I think if you get those right you've got a framework for action. You then can assess what your medium-term plans are, what are we gonna do next month, next year. But fundamentally set out your core purpose, and your core values, and you will get yourself on the right track. And it doesn't matter what size the organization is, what its reach is, I think that's, those are fundamental questions that any leader has to address.

So, my second competence is a leader needs to be an authentic communicator. In organizations, in complex organizations, in small simple organizations, there are multiple audiences. And they could be the press, they could be your customers, your staff, they could be politicians, they could be your funders, be the donors or providers of capital, there are multiple audiences. And you, as the leader, are at the hub of that set of audiences. But in this modern world with social media you have to recognize that those audiences talk to each other. Messages go from one to the other, so you have to be consistent in how you communicate in the messages that you are, but you have to do it in your way.

So, you have to find what works for you as a leader. And the answer is different. One of the things I used to do was I wrote a blog. At my time at SSE I wrote 1800 entries over a seven-year period, virtually one a day. My audience was the staff, that worked for me. For other people things like Facebook can work. I don't get anything that's called the social network I'd much rather be the anti-social network. But so, it doesn't matter what you do. Find ways of communicating that work for you that are authentic.

One of the things I like to say is the leader often is an actor because you're in, one minute you're communicating one-to-one, then you might be in a town hall meeting with 10 people then you might be speaking to a hundred or even a thousand, and you're an actor. But the sort of actor that you are is, is not a Shakespearian actor where you go and see Hamlet, or Macbeth, it's, you more an actor like Hugh Grant. Whenever you see Hugh Grant he can be a prime minister, he can be a love rat, he can be a book-shop owner, he's Hugh Grant and that's I think the sort of better model of the leader as an actor-communicator than the sort of method actor that you don't see in the character. You actually see the character in the person and your style of communication is different than mine, but it needs to be authentic to you.

The other thing you need to think about communication is always you need to repeat because people don't hear what you're saying so you have to repeat. You will get bored of your communication before people do. So, keep repeating, make sure the messages are reinforced. And the other thing is you have to tell stories. And the classic example I can give you, around storytelling, is I mentioned my blog earlier, it was the most read bit of the company's website internally, so people wanted me to do things with it. And the HR department came up to me and said, can you blog about defined contribution pensions in the chain from opting out, opting in to opting

out? No, what a pretty dry subject I can't just manufacture a blog. About six months later my daughter just started work and comes home and says, dad, what should I do about these pension forms? I then have my story that I can then blog about the advice I gave my daughter and the conversation we had and that gets the message around stakeholder pensions to the workforce, that had a story.

So, as we think as Christians about communication, we actually have a great teacher, Jesus. So, I would encourage you to pick a gospel, probably Matthew, Mark, or Luke, pick a gospel and read it with, just looking at Jesus as a communicator. So not particularly about the theology of the story, but the different ways that Jesus communicates to different authors. And sometimes he tells stories, we call them parables, but that is a communicator using the power of a story to get a message across. Sometimes it's through questioning that he communicates, sometimes it's a challenge, sometimes quite abrupt challenges, but sometimes very gentle challenges. So, just think as you develop your communication style you have a role model just think about how Jesus communicated. So that's my second competence.

My third competence I call, level five leadership. One of the leadership books that helped me most was Jim Collin's, "Good to Great," and, "Built to Last." And in one of those books he talks about the level five leader. And for his level one you've got the highly capable individual. Level two, you've got the contributing member. Level three, the competent manager. Level four, the effective leader and then the level five leader, so that's the levels. He describes the level five leader, I'm sorry I had to write this down 'cause I can't remember it, builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. Let's read that again. Building enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. It's about putting the organization first. It's about thinking the long-term. It's about the genius of and. Actually, that description could just as well be applied to servant leadership that we talk about within the church context.

So, so I think the level five leadership, and the servant leadership concepts are exactly the same. And I want to illustrate it, for example, with a quote from Truman, the U.S. President, who said, "It's amazing what you can accomplish if you don't mind who gets the credit." And a level five leader is one who wants to see others flourish and others do well. And I think it's a great example of a Christian value playing out in a leadership context. So, so I think that as you think about the style and culture of your leader think of yourself as a leader. Think about how you will affect on other people and what you will leave at the organization behind.

So, my fourth competence is teamwork. Because I passionately believe that leadership is about creating teams. It's not a star position, it's a team that have to work together. I have five steps of teamwork. The first and, and I borrowed a bit from Patrick Lencioni, but I've added to it, he had three I've got five. They all begin with C's which shows my church upbringing, you would have points beginning with the same letter.

So, my first one is, cohesive trust. And I think this is something that a lot of Christian organizations and charities forget. They think because we actually have the same faith, or because we share the same cores, we trust each other. It's not as simple as

that. You have to work to create trust in an organization and it's an active step of creating cohesive trust in a leadership group. 'Cause a second stage is constructive disagreement. You only disagree with people that you trust or, so you only disagree constructively to seek the best truth. So, beware as the leader of being a hippo. The hippo is my favourite animal, so I love this analogy 'cause hippos are extremely dangerous if you get in their way, that's not what the analogy's about, but I love hippos, but don't be a hippo. 'Cause as the leader you are frequently the highest paid person's opinion hence that's what it stands for. So, don't be a hippo. Just 'cause you're the leader you want disagreement to happen, don't be a hippo that charges around and knocks people over. Be thoughtful and encouraging of how other people express their views.

But after you've constructively disagreed and thrashed the argument around you need to get to collective agreement. You need to get to a point we all agree. And the key message I'm give you here is most people are actually a member of two teams. They lead a team, say you're the finance person in your organization, you lead that, but you're a member of the overall leadership team. Your loyalty is to the higher team. So, the agreement of the higher team matters, and you then come back and implement that in your area. So, remember collective agreement. You shake hands on what the team have done and get on with it 'cause then that leads to step four which is concrete actions. There's no point, hey, let's do, let's all, let's agree we should do something if nobody knows what they've got to do. So, the leader, the next step is, once the agreement is read, make sure that each member of the team is clear about what they need to do.

And then the last step, the last C, clear communication. 'Cause then their point in as a team deciding what to do and who's gonna do it and then forgetting to tell the organization. It's back to my authentic communication point. Be repetitive, be clear, and check what is being said and done around the organization. Now, I also think that teamwork is around building a team of lots of different people, diversity. And the analogy I would use here is it's a team of rugby players, not a team of soccer players. Rugby players, if you don't know, will have short fat guys in the front row of the scrum, the props and the hooker and I can say that 'cause that's where I used to play, short and fat. Your really tall guys who play in the second row, you've got really fast guys who play in the wing and you've got tactically astute guys who play maybe scrum-half and full-back and fly-half. Different character types and you, you merge those together to create one team. You don't want 11 people who look and think the same. So, as you build leadership teams think around that different style.

And they've even got the example in I Corinthians 12, verse 12, about the body of Christ. And actually, you need eyes and ears and mouth and nose, arms, feet, legs, you build a sense of teamwork and the job of the leader is to be the captain. And actually, generally the leader is not the best at anything. One early bit of advice I was given was always recruit people who are better than you at what you want. Be the second best so you can help and encourage the team to produce well.

So, I've talked through four competencies and this is where, again, my church upbringing is clear because actually you may not have spotted it, but they spelt a word. 'Cause I talked about strategist, authentic communication, level five leadership, and teamwork. That spells salt. We forget now in modern society how

important salt was because salt was the main way we preserved things for the long-term. And I think leadership, good leadership, preserves for the long-term.

The other thing about salt is it enhances flavour and actually good leadership enhances the skills of the team and the organization. The final aspect of salt is too much spoils, and again, leadership, too much leadership spoils an organization. And again, there is a great circularity to this because we're commanded in Matthew five, verse 13, you are the salt of the world. So, as Christians we're called to be the salt of the world. It goes on to say, if you lose your saltiness, you're useless. But I think we're called to be salt of the world as leaders and particularly so as Christian leaders.

So, I commend those of you in leadership, who are aspiring to be in leadership, to have that vision of being salt in the world and not becoming useless but being an enhancing and preserving agent for the people you lead.

Thank you.

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