How does time impact on our ability to lead?

Time in today's business environment is clearly a valuable resource which can be used to competitive advantage, and an increasingly important viewpoint is the way in which our employees experience time. Temporal Intelligence is a unique approach to understanding how time impacts on leaders and followers.

Time perspectives, one aspect of Temporal Intelligence, focuses on the extent to which a leaders dialogue and behaviour represent reflections in the past, living in the present and projecting the future.

In America, a number of chief executives who were in a workshop were asked to write a paragraph about their company. Counting the past, present and future tenses in each paragraph it was found that sentences had a much higher proportion of the present tense compared to the past or future. While this group of leaders in a sense demonstrated a present perspective, what happens if we take time to reflect in the past or project to the future?

Focus on the past

When investing resources, economic or people based, in a product or project, there will be situations when leaders face a decision on whether to terminate the commitment of those resources. Research shows that the more time a leader spends reflecting on the past, perceiving that past as important, the more likely it is that resources will continue to be invested, even in the face of mounting associated risks.

However, research has also recently shown the importance of past experience in leadership development by identifying how leaders adapt their style as they move through the leadership tiers.

Look to the future

The dangers are not likely to be limited just to the past perspective and any related sunk costs. Total focus on achieving long term strategies and goals may jeopardise immediate business interests.

This is where using more than one time perspective at the same time and hence seeing things through a *multiple time lens* may be valuable. Putting this into context, consider the process of building a vision of the future. Can you think of the time when you aimed to realise the vision of the future amongst people in your organisation? Were there any immediate issues that impeded or facilitated the development of that vision? In our research, interview data on developing a vision of the future identified a number of immediate issues such as employees' skill base, training provision and economic factors that appear to act as barriers to achieving a vision. Leaders described the importance of gaining commitment amongst employees to endorse a vision, and this required a focus on specific actions in the here and now. Conversely, leaders also reported situations where prioritising the future was done at the expense of the present. Essentially this has a *domino effect* in that neglecting short-term business needs can limit capability to achieve long-term objectives.

How can we use this information?

Firstly, as leaders are we aware of the implications of

adopting specific time perspectives on the processes we are responsible for? The risks of adopting one time perspective in visionary and decision-making aspects of leadership have already been explored. Can you think of the risks, benefits and limitations of using each of the three time perspectives in your own leadership role? A topical debate at the moment revolves around the issues arising from the rapid pace of change that has become an integral feature of the global business environment. For example, how can organisations structure themselves to adapt to economic changes and how can leadership be adapted to meet the changing needs of the workforce, such as those of Generation Y? Are you projecting to the future to consider what adaptive changes may be required? Are you reviewing the present and reflecting on the past to prepare for the future?

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