

**BE
AWARE
OF THE**



DANGER ZONE

By Chris Thurmott

In most cases, a leader is promoted into a position of power and authority because he or she is deemed the best person to guide the business towards a prosperous future. If it turns out that person is ill-suited to the task of leading, the detriment to the business can be wide-ranging.

It is easy to see the outcomes of a failing leadership structure through a range of factors, from a potential drop in productivity levels to a reduction in the quality of output or disengagement from team members. However, if it gets to this point before issues are brought to light, it might already be too late to redress the situation.

One of the best attributes leaders can possess is the self-awareness to realise they are about to fall into the danger zone of failing leadership, according to Change Meridian Managing Director Michelle Gibbings FAIM.

Ms Gibbings is a recognised expert in organisational complexity and has built a career out of helping others to better themselves and effectively manage change in a workplace environment.

Recently Ms Gibbings has been examining the warning signs of a failing leadership structure and took time out of her busy schedule to talk to *Leader* about her findings.

At the top of the warning signs list is a leader believing he or she is the smartest person in the room and surrounding themselves with sycophants – people who won't challenge ideas or offer different opinions.

Ms Gibbings said these were easy traps to fall into because, as a leader moves into more senior roles, the people around them might worry about falling out of favour if they put forward a different perspective.

She continued by stating it could be dangerous for a leader to believe he or she was the smartest person in the room because in doing so they often stopped

listening to others. This can lead to poor decisions being made, ultimately damaging the business.

"In a world that is increasingly complex, there's all these interconnections that we often can't easily see," Ms Gibbings said. "You need diversity of thought and diversity of opinion to really make sure we're making good decisions."

Ms Gibbings said a great way to avoid either of these issues from arising was for a leader to be humble enough to ask for help and to be able to turn to a trusted advisor, mentor or colleague who will challenge their views, and hold them to account.

Allowing oneself to be challenged in the workplace goes some of the way to creating psychological safety, which according to a recent study by Google was the best environment for a successful regime.

Google conducted the study to find out why some of its teams stumbled while others soared. The study was conducted over a number of years and found the most productive teams were the ones where the participants felt comfortable or psychologically safe enough to voice their opinions. The teams that contained dominant voices or people who felt they were above those around them generally

performed to a considerably lower standard than those where each team member spoke and contributed an even amount.

Referring to one of her favourite books, *The Power Paradox* by Dacher Keltner, Ms Gibbings said one of the biggest leadership failures was an abuse of power.

"The research referenced in the book is that power is actually conferred on a person by others – usually because of the good they have done," she said. "However, over time our very experience of power destroys the skills that got us the power in the first place.

"If you start thinking 'it's all about me' as opposed to 'what can I do to help others?' or you stop listening to or ignoring the feedback from others, that's when you are in danger of falling into this trap."

The ability to manage complexity in an increasingly complex world is among the traits an ideal leader should possess, according to Ms Gibbings.

Integrity, compassion and fairness are also high on the list. Furthermore, it can be helpful to consider that different circumstances may require different leadership traits. Referencing the work of world leader in emotional intelligence Daniel Goleman, Ms Gibbings said there were different types of leaders for different environments.

"You need to be authentic but also be able to adapt to different styles of leadership and make sure you're able to get the best out of the environment you're working in," she said.

Although it may be difficult to self-identify limitations in a leadership style, a leader should always be open to receiving advice and help from those around them. Ms Gibbings remembers an interview with former GE CEO Jack Welch where he talked about how he only hired people who were smarter than him, so they would fill any gaps that existed.



Michelle Gibbings.

