BY MICHELLE GIBBINGS

ARE YOU LEADING FROM THE FRONT?

Every year, thousands of new leadership books hit the bookstores. Despite the plethora of reading material and research, the evidence of leadership challenges and failures isn't hard to spot.

From Facebook's privacy breaches, the Theranos scandal, Uber's failure to deal with sexual harassment, Equifax's data breaches, Volkswagen's emissions scandal, and the stories coming from the Banking Royal Commission, failures are everywhere.

Whilst the context and specifics are different, they all demonstrate an absence of leaders showing up, asking the right questions and making principled decisions in the company's long-term interests.

Leading from the front

Henry V, one of Shakespeare's most well-known plays, centres around the time before and after the famous Battle of Agincourt in 1415.

The English troops were vastly out-numbered by the French soldiers, and so victory looked uncertain. The night before the battle the King wandered around the English camp at night, in disguise, to comfort the soldiers but also to understand how they are feeling. The next morning, Henry leads his troops into battle and ultimate victory. His leadership wasn't at the back of the line, but at the front participating in the battle.

It's in stark contrast to many leaders today, where leading isn't done at the front line or down in the trenches. Instead, it's done remotely – from a comfortable office and via emails, SMS or social media.

In the modern world, if countries go to war it's not the ruling politician or leader who goes into battle. Likewise, many corporate leaders can remain one step removed from decisions and expect employees to do things they wouldn't like to do.

Get involved

The best leaders are willing to get amongst it and to understand what it is like to be on the front line serving customers or working on the shop-floor. They are eager to experience the challenges that staff confront so they are better informed and therefore able to make wiser decisions.

Leading from the front can't be done from the comfort of the corner office (or even the open-plan desk), it involves:

• Being willing to roll your sleeves up and get actively engaged with employees at all levels of the organisation so you understand the challenges and opportunities they face;

• Actively leading the change you are seeking to make by being the first to immerse yourself in the new ways of working;

• Not expecting one rule for you and other leaders, and one rule for other employees;

• Not asking your team members to do things you wouldn't want to do;

• Being approachable and with that, being willing to listen to ideas from people across the organisation;

• Seeking ways to better understand the environment in which your team members are working so you can find ways to best support and develop their contribution; and

• Being conscious of the privileged position you are in, because with your position comes the power to make decisions that can impact people around you – for good and not so good outcomes.

Make each day count

Being a leader is challenging and there is often not enough time in the day. Prioritisation, focus and being willing to take risks becomes crucial so that each day counts as progress towards long-term goals.

Doing that requires courage. It takes courage to step out in front. It can feel much safer and less risky to stay cocooned away from the action. Progress, however, is much harder to make when you play it safe.

In the words of John Quincy Adams, the sixth President of the United States: "If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader."

Michelle Gibbings is a change leadership and career expert and founder of Change Meridian. Michelle works with leaders and teams to help them get fit for the future of work. She is the Author of 'Step Up: How to Build Your Influence at Work and 'Career Leap: How to Reinvent and Liberate your Career'.

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