

LIGHTHOUSE LEADERSHIP – The Searchlight That Can Switch People Off

Last month we talked about ‘making your boat go faster’. This month our leadership conversation is about the direction you are heading and how to steer your people on a steady course through stormy waters. We coined the phrase ‘Lighthouse Leadership’ in response to a tendency we noticed in some organisations for senior leaders to keep the performance spotlight swivelling around various performance measures, constantly seeking out those measures that are below expectations. Once found, the spotlight is intensified and focused to highlight shortfalls in performance and improvement is then demanded.

The reaction from those caught in the glare is usually a collective and knowing sigh, followed by yet another change of direction as scarce improvement resource is re-allocated to attack this latest ‘priority challenge’. Once improvement activity is underway, the lighthouse keeper moves the spotlight on and the recently started improvement activity continues, basking in the afterglow of senior leadership attention, right up until the next area of underperformance is highlighted; then, scarce improvement resource is once again moved on, leaving behind an improvement initiative that is usually half finished...

The area of performance improvement is full of hackneyed expressions: ‘*what gets measured gets done*’, ‘*you get what you inspect not what*

you expect’ - the list goes on. Like most popular expressions there is a grain of truth in what they convey. Certainly it is our experience that whatever leaders pay attention to and reward has a big effect on what their people focus on. The ‘watch out’ for senior leaders is that if the focus is entirely on ‘problems’ and ‘under performance’ this will inflame weariness and cynicism, which in turn kills energy and creativity and results in people disengaging from their work. Not the reaction you want. Your people want to be caught doing things right occasionally, as well as doing things wrong. Our advice to all ‘Lighthouse Leaders’ is to use your light to switch people on, not switch them off.

Gallup research has confirmed our long held view that highly engaged and motivated people produce startling results. They use their discretionary effort to focus on what really matters and do not dissipate scarce energy chasing short term problems and opportunities. Wise ‘Lighthouse Leaders’ will focus their spotlight on three vital ingredients:

1. Create crystal clarity on what you want to achieve as an organisation and why;
2. Encourage your people to build valued and authentic relationships. They are the source of new opportunities from which new actions can emerge. And finally;

3. Provide the wherewithal to deliver these new actions so you get better quality, strategically significant and sustainable results.

As a Lighthouse Leader, what you focus on really matters, especially at this time when we are all under pressure to perform in extraordinary circumstances. Winston Churchill used his ability to do this to galvanise a whole nation. As one Oxford Don said of him to one of us:

“For all his prejudices and excesses, for all his anachronisms, during that period when literally everything was at stake, he told us who we were...and we believed him. And that meant everything.”

Vision is important, but without purpose it will



Sensei is an international consulting firm that helps their clients deliver business results by improving human performance and optimising the value of team and leadership interactions.

We focus on areas where companies can raise the bar on performance, productivity and profit. We ensure that any work we do has clear line of sight to specific business outcomes of value to the organisation, so that a solid return on time, energy and investment is realised.

We are experts in the process of unlocking potential and focusing this in the right ways on the right aims; and we excel at emotionally engaging leaders and teams to own the change, take accountability for it and deliver it. In short ... **‘We do the really hard part of the soft stuff.’**

not engage passion. At Sensei our vision is to help you engage human performance. Why? To help you deliver strategic results. This is where our vision and purpose come together and our passion gets ignited.

Intelligent use of your leadership spotlight is a real untapped area of opportunity that comes with a genuine challenge. Make sure the measures you are spotlighting are ‘value growth’ measures and not simply ‘activity’ or ‘input’ measures decoupled from your higher purpose. Your measures have to track things that are generative, on vision and on purpose, not just remedial in a reflexive almost stimulus-response way. That said, fast response and recalibration need to remain the order of the day as regards execution or overall performance will suffer, even when you do switch on the spotlight.

Stop the endless swivelling and focus more on your higher purpose. Use the spotlight of your attention to bring this purpose to life and illuminate the path so others can follow. If you do this well you will engage an energy source that will produce startling results. This requires a steadfast purpose and a consistent set of leadership behaviours so the improvement light shines bright and steady.

The recent battening down of the hatches to ride out the storm seems to have sent some ‘Lighthouse Leaders’ indoors; worrying about the rocks, they hunker down and make their light swivel faster and faster. Beware! What we need at this time is a steady focus on what will really make a difference and deliver us safely through the choppy waters we are navigating at present.

Malcolm Follos, April 2004