



FEATURE

Leaders playing it safe? Get real!

Real leadership is the key to ensuring the future health of organisations, says **Graham Jones**

Good economic climates hide many flaws in organisations, and poor leadership and inept leaders often go unnoticed in those favourable times. Too often, as long as the results are delivered, there are few questions asked about 'how' they are delivered.

But things are very different when times are tough. Leaders have never been more visible or exposed than during the recent dramatic difficulties facing the business world. These have been rollercoaster times that have engulfed large, seemingly-untouchable corporations. This is when outstanding leadership is so crucial; of course, and it also just happens to be when outstanding leadership is so very difficult to deliver!

Employees need and want to be able to trust their leaders in these difficult times so being open and letting them know how things stand is paramount. Recognising that an inevitable part of change and turbulent times is a fair amount of catastrophising and doom and gloom is also important because leaders will need to help their people deal with it. Listening to their concerns, showing empathy and reminding them of the successes, however small, always have to be at the forefront of the leader's mind in these circumstances. But leaders must also continue

to focus on a strategy for moving forward and keeping their people focused on delivering quality service and products to their customers.

Leaders are being stretched to their limit

All this is demanded of leaders, of course, when they may be feeling pretty worried and pessimistic themselves! Clients, employees, shareholders and the media are just a few of the stakeholders who watch leaders very carefully indeed to see how they cope in such circumstances.

So in turbulent economic markets, even the best leaders are stretched to their limits. What has worked in the past may not work now. This is the time when the pressure cauldron that leaders find themselves in either makes or breaks them.

So why would anyone want to be a leader?

I have deliberately painted a dark side of leadership to emphasise just how demanding it is to do it well. This is why the underlying motives for being a leader are so important, yet too often neglected in leadership development.

My experience of coaching numerous senior leaders in FTSE 100 and *Fortune* 500 companies has led to my realisation that there are two broad sets of motives for being a leader that drive different behaviours and have different impacts on organisations. I have consequently identified two types of leader that I call 'real' and 'safe'.

Real and safe leaders

At the extreme, *safe* leaders are driven so much by their needs for rewards, status and power that they are unwilling to put themselves on the line because of the threat of losing their position if they get it wrong. *Safe* leaders keep their heads out of the firing line, they are risk-averse, and will sit

In turbulent economic markets, even the best leaders are stretched to their limits



tight in the hope that more favourable conditions are just around the corner. There is little or no innovation and challenging orthodoxy during their tenure since their focus is almost exclusively on micro-managing the short term, particularly around things like achieving this week's numbers. In tough times, their focus is on cutting costs and probably putting a halt to development activities like coaching.

Real leaders, on the other hand, are driven much more by the challenge and opportunity to put themselves out there and make a difference; this is what leadership is about for them. *Real* leaders become more prominent in tough times; they are highly visible and make things happen. Sure, they have to focus on, and manage, the short-term challenges but their mind is more on investing for the future. *Real* leaders view the current difficulties as being a time when development is most needed; this is the time to nurture and retain talent in order to gain competitive advantage in the longer term.

How do you spot real and safe leaders?

Of course, *safe* leaders exist in various guises so that different people will exhibit the traits in varying degrees. What is common across them is their reluctance to put themselves on the line; they have too much to lose if they get it wrong. A couple of examples of *safe* leaders are as follows:

- I worked with one *safe* leader whose 'motive' was noticeable by his resistance to identifying a vision, long-term strategy and plan for the organisation he headed up. He chose, instead, to keep himself busy by reacting to the usual day-to-day 'trivia' that kept him out of any firing line
- in another case, a business unit head clearly hid behind an overt claim that her style was to lead through consensus. This led to too much debate and conflict among her team of opinionated, strong-willed and competitive individuals. She was too slow to make the decisions that needed to be made. She was playing it *safe*.





FEATURE

Safe leaders are driven so much by their needs for rewards, status and power that they are unwilling to put themselves on the line

Real leaders also come in different 'shapes and sizes'. A couple of examples are:

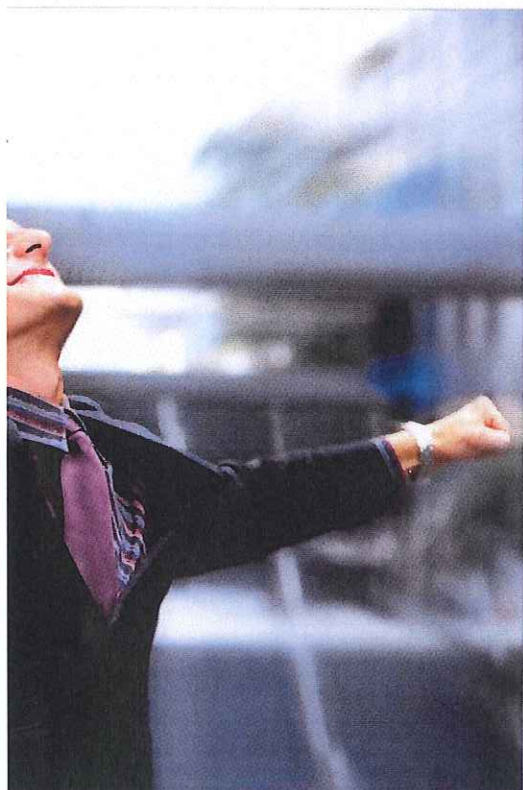
- one female MD of a large distribution company was very clear about her non-negotiables when it came to providing quality customer service. This meant introducing metrics that would highlight areas of weakness and be unpopular with some of her people because they were at risk of being exposed as underperformers. And not all members of her board agreed with her, either, but she was resolute in her *rationale* and the new metrics resulted in a significant impact on customer satisfaction. Here was a *real* leader who was willing to challenge the *status quo* despite the fact it was not popular to begin with
- a leader in a well-known company was instrumental in bringing about a much-needed culture change in the form of clear role-modelling of values that would underpin future success. The culture had been characterised by hard work and very long working hours. He recognised that the future well-being of the company depended on working smarter not harder. At least once a week, he would make a big thing of leaving the office early, saying that he was going home to spend some quality time with his family.

The differences between *real* and *safe* leaders are particularly evident and pronounced during tough times. Remember that what lies at the core of the *safe* leader will mainly be about role security. This leader really values the prestige, status, power, authority and financial package that come with leadership. There is a lot to lose for this leader, and not taking risks, to him, means ensuring no mistakes. He withdraws into a safety zone. Now is the time to avoid conflict and it becomes too risky to challenge peers' or bosses' views. He spends less time coaching his people and more time telling his



subordinates what to do and how to do it. He is careful what he says and sits tight in the hope that more favourable times are just around the corner. His focus is on cutting costs and hitting short-term targets.

At the other end of this *continuum* is the *real* leader. Tough times is his calling; he comes to the fore and is even more visible. He focuses on what he can control and make things happen. *Real* leaders make, and stand by, their decisions and 'tell it how it is'. They view tough economic climates as being a time when development is most needed. Their skills are probably even more prominent as they strive to lead the organisation and support their people through turbulent, and sometimes catastrophic, circumstances. This is where their personal resources are so important, to the extent that they are highly visible to their people. Their resilience, optimism balanced with realism, strength of character, vast experience, care and determination will be very evident. But so, too, will the fact that they are human beings like everyone



else. They also have doubts and worries and there is no point hiding them. *Real* leaders are authentic and their impact in organisations is much more a function of *how they are* than *what they do*.

What impact do they have?

The differences in the way *real* and *safe* leaders go about their day-to-day roles and responsibilities means that, at the extremes, they make very different impacts on their organisations. *Real* leaders create an environment in which:

- individuals and teams are clear about what is expected of them on a day-to-day basis as well in the longer term
- success is recognised and celebrated
- people thrive in conditions created by the combination of high-performance expectations and high levels of support to achieve them
- coaching is the norm, being underpinned by good working relationships, a feedback culture, accountability and ownership, and clearly-defined goals

- there is a 'we're in it together' mentality that is the foundation of high-performing teams
- 'healthy competition' exists in the form of shared learning and commitment to everyone's development, as well as individual and team goals being completely aligned.

Safe leaders, on the other hand, create an environment in which:

- there appears to be little going on; it is a stagnating environment
- there is a strong sense of politics
- it is more about *who* you know than *what* you know
- people are not stimulated
- a lot happens behind closed doors
- there is little respect for the leaders
- good performance happens more by accident than by design
- there is an 'I don't care' mentality.

So how do you create a *real* leadership culture?

Real leaders hold the key to the future health of all organisations. Yet, too often, organisations allow *safe* leaders to perpetuate the *status quo* and hinder progress and innovation. For example, despite knowing better, organisations still make the mistake of promoting people to leadership positions based on criteria related almost exclusively to functional expertise rather than leadership capability. These people are rewarded for being good as a functional manager and the safer option when they find themselves with the difficult challenge of leading people is to bury themselves in micro-management.

Organisations should, instead, place far greater emphasis on identifying a *real* leadership mindset when assessing leadership potential. This will ensure that future leaders' motives have people at their core, and also that they possess a strong capability to deal with the pressures that accompany the role. This will not be achieved until organisations first prioritise the need and then find and implement ways and means of evaluating these crucial leadership requirements.

Organisations can also move towards a *real* leadership culture by emphasising, and making a big show of rewarding, innovation instead of merely paying lip-service to it. They should create environments that encourage calculated risks and tolerate responsible mistakes if they are to embrace true innovation. And most organisations with a preponderance of *safe* leaders do not operate an effective feedback system and process. If they do have one, it probably generates feedback





FEATURE

Real leaders are driven much more by the challenge and opportunity to put themselves out there and make a difference

on transactional performance rather than on transformational leadership.

Challenging *safe* leaders and supporting *real* leaders

The essence of creating a *real* leadership culture lies in supporting those leaders who strive to spend most of their time at the *real* end of the continuum, and challenging those who are stuck, or choose to be, at the *safe* end.

Challenging *safe* leaders is difficult! They are likely to exhibit classic symptoms of either 'denial' ('leave me alone to be the good leader I already am') or 'resistance' ('I'm far too busy to attend that leadership programme').

Here are a few ideas on how to challenge them:

- get them to create and communicate visions to their teams. This will ensure they are proactive in focusing on the future and, by going public on it with their team, become visible and 'own' it
- ensure they receive impactful developmental feedback on a regular basis rather than once a year during performance reviews. *Safe* leaders do not want feedback, or are quick to dismiss any they receive that they don't like. So find a way of ensuring they *do* receive 360° feedback on their leadership that makes an impact and will compel them to action
- provide them with a challenging coach who has permission to push them outside their safety zone; encouraging risk-taking, making the tough decisions they've been avoiding and getting them to think beyond what they believe has worked in the past
- help them set goals that will drive their day-to-day leadership behaviours rather than the annual review goals that get lost and forgotten for 12 months. These should be in the form of process goals around 'how to be' as opposed to 'what to do' as a leader.

Supporting *real* leaders is equally difficult because it provides a different type of challenge. These leaders want to explore and experiment as part of their continuous growth. They want to be stretched and to feel constantly at the cutting edge of leadership.

Here are a few ideas on how to support them:

- provide them with access to the latest thinking on leadership. Send them to thought leadership conferences and seminars where they can feed off like-minded leaders from other organisations
- find ways of providing them with a voice in the organisation by facilitating access to its most senior leaders. They want to share their innovative views and ideas with their bosses. They are also keen to provide feedback on what is, and what is not, working
- *real* leaders are hungry for feedback so ensure that processes are in place outside the formal performance reviews
- provide access to a coach who can help them with their feelings of loneliness and isolation; their high visibility means they will experience these feelings from time to time. The coach should also support their development of mental toughness to enable them to thrive on the pressure
- provide them with a mentor who they can bounce ideas off and who will keep them stimulated
- invite them to lead work streams that are focused on change initiatives
- recognise these *real* leaders and endorse their behaviours in public forums.

Conclusion

The future health of organisations has never been more important than right now. Large organisations that have previously seemed untouchable in any economic conditions are struggling to survive.

Real leaders hold the key to all organisations' well-being, whether measured in terms of bottom-line or in employee engagement. Allow *safe* leaders to continue to dominate your organisations at your peril! **TJ**

Professor Graham Jones

is co-founder of Lane4 Management Group and author of *Thrive on Pressure: Lead and Succeed When Times Get Tough* (McGraw-Hill, 2010). He can be contacted via www.lane4performance.com