

Human-centred leadership vital to survive an uncertain future



South Africans are known for our extraordinary resilience. But with no clear end to the pandemic in sight, as well as the compounded stress of the unrest earlier in the year, local business leaders should be asking what they can do to help fatigued teams continue to show up.

When you ask most people to draw their organisation they'll start with a triangle. The leaders are the important people at the top, holding the knowledge, power and influence over people below. Leadership in these companies is about retaining an aura of infallibility, and protecting it by having the answers, and avoiding uncomfortable public displays of emotions, numbers or truths.

In the work done with local clients we find that leaders have been in uncharted waters through the pandemic, unable to deliver the 'growth' they promised, being confronted with teams in unprecedented levels of distress. In short, they have realised they are leading people not employees. It is no longer possible to leave personal circumstances at the door as you enter the workplace - virtually or physically. The events of the last 20 months, compounded by the uncertainty of what lies ahead, have forced managers to adopt a more intuitive leadership style.

Good leaders are willing to listen more and are willing to incorporate what is happening in their own lives. Whereas before, leaders were always encouraged to separate their personal lives from their professional, we are now working with more and more people who have had to deal with the death of a loved one or friend over the past twenty months and this shared experience is being felt in how we are dealing with one another.

This human-centred leadership has resulted in companies making more resources and support available, including psychiatric help. Unfortunately, there is still a stigma associated with acknowledging mental health challenges.

Successful human-centred leadership is empathic and relies on a language set that takes the stigma out

of admitting you are struggling. She says this is vital given how many business leaders are sharing how they and their teams are dealing with fatigue, a lack of boundaries when they are working from home, as well as generally being overwhelmed.

Building team resilience when you have none

A big challenge for leaders especially in frontline businesses is an extreme feeling of guilt. While they are often safe at home, they are making decisions for their teams who are working on the frontline and exposing themselves to daily risks. High-stakes decisions have been made over the last 20 months. Even if they haven't been in a frontline sector, leaders have had to make decisions that have massively impacted individuals and families.

While many leaders have done their best to support their teams, what we have seen emerge is the internal conflict of acting strong versus dropping the armour and showing their fallibility - their humanity. When we speak to teams about what kind of leadership has most supported them through the pandemic, they don't talk about strategies and crisis plans, they talk about that text or phone call from their boss to check in on how they are doing.

However, there has been very little support for leaders to deal with their own challenges, or even acknowledgement that they need support, and without this, their ability to support their people and make challenging decisions is made all the harder.

Time to re-assess organisational culture

The Within People partners have been working with clients to help them find the leadership resilience required to navigate the uncertainty of the next few months - a process we refer to as 'building sustainable resilience'.

Two years ago, we were speaking about work, life balance. But we just have one continuum now, and so perhaps it's easier to make the connection between personal resilience, self-care, and leadership resilience. It's finding this connection that will equip leaders to face what is still to come.

Looking ahead, the partners agree that the uncertainty of how and when this pandemic will end, the approaching municipal elections, the ongoing economic uncertainty, and even the potential for more unrest, should be giving leaders pause for thought.

This is the time to reassess your organisational culture. Leaders need to be mindful about what kind of environment they are creating because it will need to support the people who will ultimately ensure your survival over the coming months. You can have a strategy and a plan, but when that goes out the window it will be the people on the ground who will come up with the creative solution to your future. Leaders must have the tools to create a sustainable, resilient environment. And that requires human-centred leadership.