

Humble leadership is the key ingredient for business agility



Businesses have faced external disruption long before the Covid-19 pandemic broke in South Africa, and they'll continue to do so long after. As so many companies struggle for survival, the ability to adapt to change becomes key to ensuring that businesses remain open to service clients. The pandemic has brought with it a number of operational challenges, including nationwide shutdowns, restrictions on working hours and limitations on staff headcount; but the biggest impact has undoubtedly been mental. It's been nearly two years that people have been dealing with unimaginable stress and uncertainty on both a work and a personal level. Worrying about the health and safety of loved ones, as well as increasingly difficult economic conditions is taking its toll on workers. However, with its workforce being the company's greatest asset, looking after people should be a priority. Here, leadership is critical in lifting and maintaining employee morale, motivating workers and guiding them through the challenges that lie ahead on the road to business recovery.

Focus on people, not technology

For businesses today, the most important thing is not to lose sight of the fact that change is likely to remain a constant backdrop. Management should be assessing how best to respond to change to counter the bigger disruptions happening in our industries. From a leadership perspective, strategy needs to focus on agility and the best way to achieve this is to have people at the centre of the organisation. This is where many leaders make the mistake of looking for a technological solution that puts technology at the centre of a business – however, with technology evolving at such a rapid rate, businesses just find themselves playing catch-up. By placing people and leadership at the heart of the business instead, this allows for those people and their leaders to drive change and be in a position to assess and counter external conditions appropriately.

Human-centred strategy to enable agility

Putting the human element at the front and centre of business strategy is particularly necessary because ultimately people respond best to people, and usually exhibit an initial tendency to be hesitant of technology-related change. Just as important is the leadership to give wings to human-centred strategy which requires management who are capable of dispelling the traditional notion of leadership as standing head and shoulders above those they lead. The requirements of leadership have fundamentally changed, and individuals who take charge now need to act with humility and admit that they don't have all the answers, because they're only human themselves. This is a more constructive approach to leadership, because a person who knows everything diminishes their capacity for change. On the other hand, if a leader accepts that they don't have all the answers, they're open to new possibilities and finding fresh solutions to managing disruptions.

Embrace disruption through leadership

While many businesses and individuals are hoping that the Covid-19 disruptions have an expiry date after which we'll fall out of crisis, this is wishful thinking as there will always be another disruption on the horizon. This is particularly critical in a time where many people are struggling with pandemic-related depression, fatigue and burn-out. Between Covid-19 restrictions, load shedding and financial pressure, many people are just going through the motions at work, and a strong leadership team can hold their hands while getting them excited about a better future. For this, business owners need to let leaders play their role, with clear expectations of what they need to achieve. Seniors in the organisational hierarchy need to provide the encouragement, mentorship and incentives for leaders to step up - essentially creating an environment in which leaders are inspired to lead. It's tempting to think that just because we are in the midst of a pandemic-related crisis, that now is not the time to focus on leadership training when in fact it is the complete opposite. Now is the time to develop leadership capacity within the business, because that spark of inspiration has to come from the top.

Now is the time for leadership training

Leadership training is more effective if it is experiential and face-to-face, as this is the ideal opportunity for individuals to rekindle their energy, and work on their ability to integrate and collaborate with people in ways that have been impacted by Covid-19 restrictions. There is no better time to train leaders to get us out of a crisis, than in the midst of one, as through such development, leaders can gain the emotional tools to handle their people with empathy. Here, a training provider that is aligned with the business' specific values is important, because when there's alignment between the values of the provider, and that of the company, there's always a better chance of success.