

Unlocking Trusted Leadership: Insights from an Industry Expert



“Leadership to me is someone who recognises the need to invest time in growing their emotional intelligence, communication skills and trust with their colleagues.”

Leadership is particularly topical ahead of the upcoming national elections, and whilst we don't have political advice, the concept of what a leader should be is something that can be applied across every sphere of life. International performance coach and CEO of Awakening Leadership, Alvin Govender, can speak at length about the topic because it's a fundamental element of the work he does.

Govender sees leadership as one of the most critical elements to any company's success and says that we are currently facing a leadership crisis. Today, more than ever, the dynamics of the workplace remain volatile and fluid. The pandemic and the current economy have left people uncertain and insecure. When the only constant is change, it's up to the leaders to steer their employees towards more comfortable ground and to be seen making a visible effort to build trust.

A gift to motivate for change

Starting his career as a classroom teacher, Govender says that as young as 21 years old, he realised that helping people to better themselves is what made him come alive. Govender started motivational speaking whilst teaching, but likes to think that he was a coach inside the classroom too. “Teaching taught me skills like how to read a room, feel people out and how to keep an audience's attention.”

Govender is quick with a laugh and a playful quip, which has made him as popular in the boardroom as he was in the classroom. His ability to engage with people is telling of the work he's so passionate about,

with him remarking that you can tell a lot about a person by the way that they command a room.

Govender often refers to trusted leadership being a model or a system, as opposed to a person and says that a pivotal moment in his career was figuring out that leadership should be based on a foundation of trust.

Between 2013 and 2017, Govender did affiliate work for other companies but found himself frustrated by the tick-box methodology that was being deployed. Although he approached the work with pure intentions, he found at times it was a continuous battle to connect with people because they felt that he was there as part of a Human Resources-mandated task.

Taking the time to examine the pitfalls of the industry, he decided he wanted to be seen as something other than a paper-pusher. This is why a large bulk of the work that Awakening Leadership does is completed before they even step into a boardroom, with a huge emphasis on preparation and research. Govender says there's no need to keep it a secret that many people saw some of the coaching as 'fluffy tools' and whilst they could see the potential benefits of the material, they battled to truly connect with it.

Implementing trusted leadership: practical strategies

The leadership system is crucial, more so with the increased number of millennial employees who want to be heard. We need to adjust and embody a leadership model that allows for this. Instead of being a figurehead, Govender advocates for visible leaders, working next to their team and not above them. Although it would be impossible to engage with 20,000 people, it is always possible to engage where it matters and there is a trickle-down effect throughout the organisation. From an executive level, when you arrive at Exco, he reminds you to bring your whole self and be mindful of how you engage. This filters down to how the members of the Exco engage with their team, and how those members communicate within the company.

“The higher your title, the bigger your responsibility is to try and find ways in which to energise the system in which you work.”

Although a promotion can leave a person feeling validated for their hard work, Govender says that is where the hard work starts. He advises most leaders to work on the basis that there is no trust and to work on building it.

These are the simple guidelines he uses to help executives rebuild trust:

Always deliver what you promised or what was expected.

Your values form the foundation. Aligning to values builds stronger teams and inspires growth.

Purpose. Know what you are good at. A highly skilled leader is trusted.

Consistency. Treat everyone equally - bias and nepotism destroy a healthy culture.

Your word is crucial. When you say you will do something, get it done.

Crucial conversations. Things do not always go according to plan. A leader who has tough conversations wins trust.

Be visible. In the easy and hard times. Sometimes your task may not be to speak but to listen.

Uncertainty and Change. Understand that employees feel overwhelmed about their future. Walk the journey with them.

Hold people accountable. Letting things slide makes people uncomfortable in the long term. A trusted

leader leads by setting high standards and expecting everyone to do the same.

For the past five years, Govender has evolved from wellness initiatives to becoming the 'strategy guy', known for being the person who will help you solve problems. This progression speaks to his work ethic and ability to have the hard conversations that are so needed.

“Leadership is the commitment to growing and setting rules for yourself.”