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Gill South: Walking the talk the best weapon in the leadership armoury

3:45 AM Monday Dec 14, 2009

Air New Zealand chief executive Rob Fyfe was named the country's top executive last month at the Deloitte/*Management* magazine Top 200 company awards.

Fyfe's handling of the aftermath of the Airbus crash off France illustrated his personal management style, said the judges. His behaviour is now seen as something of a blueprint for how to handle stressful personal and organisational tragedies.



After the crash in November last year, Fyfe followed his instincts and went to France to be there for the families of his staff who were hit by the tragedy. Meanwhile, he kept his people back in New Zealand up to speed with what he was doing with daily emails.

A new book on change leadership, *Developing Change Leaders*, by Paul Aitken and Malcolm Higgs, urges leaders and managers to look hard at their personal values and the values of their organisation if they want success and a business with longevity. Values are more crucial than people think, says Aitken, who recently visited from Britain, where he teaches and supervises senior executives as a visiting fellow at Henley Business School.

In a survey, 82 per cent of British professionals said they would not work for an organisation whose values they did not believe in.

Aitken, who in 2003 helped set up the Management Development Centre in Wellington – now known as the Leadership Development Centre – is R&D director for Concordia International, an organisational change consultancy in Wellington.

The strategic leadership consultant says personal values are now rather belatedly being examined in the financial services industry. Britain's Financial Services Authority has recommended that the personal values of senior bankers are assessed. "At last, it's dawned on them that a lot of leadership behaviour is values," says Aitken. If the values are faulty, regulation is not going to help. On leadership, he says: "In the new world with limited resources, I would recommend that leaders spend more time on strategic leadership issues." Learn to delegate, then don't meddle, he advises.

Leaders have to get over their ego. When they communicate, they have to be frank with one another. "I see it when I'm coaching executive teams and the more that's left unsaid in the room, the more will be said outside the room, instead of saying: 'It's difficult stuff, let's do it together'."

And he says the charismatic leader can have a downside – the tendency towards narcissism.

Aitken points to the self-serving motives of recent leaders, such as Royal Bank of Scotland chief

executive Sir Fred Goodwin, who was motivated by greed and believed in the approach that the bank must speculate to accumulate. He was decisive but for all the wrong reasons.

Quiet leaders who are not blown around by whim are better role models, says Aitken. The consultant, who has lived and worked here over the past 15 years, cites Dr Don Merton, the Department of Conservation senior technical officer who worked for years to save the kakapo, as one of the quiet leaders who has never swayed from his goals. "There's something about these leaders quietly going about their business."

Aitken's book cites a longitudinal study of successful executives done by Good to Great author Jim Collins, which showed that "quiet leadership" was the norm for these "good to great" leaders, who were dedicated to "building the organisation rather than their CVs".

Successful leaders also tended to emphasise starting with the right team rather than the right project. "If you begin with who, rather than what, you can more easily adapt to a changing world," say Aitken and Higgs.

US President Barack Obama is another example of a leader with authentic values, says Aitken. "Obama's values are obvious, he is explicit about them."

A leader's ability to role-model is crucial, says the consultant. Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's spontaneous decision to go straight to the scene during the Australian bushfires was a good one. "These moments are priceless. When you are in the spotlight, you can send a message."

"Walking the talk" still remains the most powerful weapon in the leadership-of-change armoury, says the book. "It is the most personal and observable way leaders acting in concert can send out priority cues for staff, both for business outcome and culture change shifts."

Former US President George Bush's decision to disappear behind security after the 9/11 attacks was not so estimable. "Leaders can't hide. Every moment they should be thinking, 'What am I trying to portray?'" If you want to motivate people, you have to show the human touch, says Aitken. "Without that, how do you get that respect?"

The consultant is not a fan of company mission statements, which typically parrot generic messages. "They are all the same," he says. "The point is, there are no competitive advantages in these statements. Competitive advantage comes with uniqueness. These statements don't help people understand what companies are about."

Aitken questions the wisdom of expensive executive programmes for chief executives, and says research has shown 70 per cent of learning about leadership comes from on-the-job experience.

"In the good old days you used to send senior execs off to executive programmes. But these are not addressing all their learning needs and are quite elitist. Would it be better spread among younger members of the workforce? You've got to think about how to get best impact on leadership and get that return on investment."

In *Developing Change Leaders* Aitken talks about leaders fostering a collaborative, collective leadership. "Creating a culture of excellence is all about making positive gains in people performance over time. Leadership teams must themselves champion transformative behaviours. By doing so they will positively

drive employee performance and consequently business results."

The book warns that managers be alert to "pseudo-transformational" leadership or leadership that appears confident even though the leader is unsure about what he or she is doing. They may be telling followers what to do, or worse, knowingly focusing followers on unattainable visions.

"This is likely to stimulate hate and conflict rather than harmony and co-operation," say Aitken and Higgs.

Probably the most important role of a leader is to ensure a ready supply of replacement leaders, they conclude.

"Research shows for every two heirs who make it to the top, one leaves early and heirs depart notably more often than their bosses."

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