

News

Dithering is good, consultant argues

PATRICK SMELLIE

The trouble with growth is that you lose the intimacy and sheer idiosyncrasy of the upstart smaller business, says Paul Aitken, the director of research and development for Concordia International, a Wellington-based global leadership consultancy.

As large organisations seek to rekindle that innovative spark, he says they routinely spend large sums of money trying to create or distil a particular culture, tied often to a common set of corporate values.

The trouble with that, says Aitken, who works all over the world teaching, studying, and practising leadership, is that organisations don't have values. People have values.

Understanding this subtle point is the key to transformational leadership, says Aitken, co-author with Professor Malcolm Higgs of *Developing Change Leaders*, a direct product of his research and development role. Higgs is a professor of organisation behaviour at Southampton University School of Management.

"There's no such thing as a common corporate culture," says Aitken. "The reality of organisational life is that you only have sub-cultures. The culture and values will be very different in R&D than they are in sales.

"The R&D folk will be driven by deep professional expertise so they'll



Paul Aitken: Research shows leaders spent 80 per cent of their time together on matters that only add 10 per cent value to the business.

be really, really keen on learning, while the sales dept are probably more interested in the rewards.

Of course, he agrees, you have to organise people to deliver things, which is what managers are for.

"You've got to have your standard working practices so that your business engine runs well, but it completely ignores that to motivate peo-

ple you will need you to tap into their different values. Allow it, even communicate it through their personal values." And if you're lucky enough to be in a leadership position, "don't get in your manager's space, in their hair," says Aitken. "Why would you employ them?"

"That's the biggest transition from a functional head to a general man-

ager. Suddenly your diary isn't all full of things you have to do. It's more a proposition of people and resource and clients – the most effective leaders make that transition quicker."

After all, a leadership community is "a massively expensive resource and the research shows that they spend 80 per cent of their time together on matters that only add 10 per cent value to the business. They're talking about operational stuff mainly." And then there's the question of what those chosen corporate values are – often the subject of much corporate introspection.

"Guess what," says Aitken. "They're all the same.

"There's a whole industry out there and I've been part of it, so I put my hand up, I've been part of senior leadership teams, and we buy into all these motherhood and apple pie statements about organisational values – customer excellence, valuing our people, you know, integrity – whatever.

"There's no competitive advantage or separate identity around that. It's not demonstrating any uniqueness or even what you might be signing up to as an employee. Why do organisations spend millions coming up with value statements that are the same as their competitor down the road?"

Which loops back to the original point: that there is a loss of identity and authenticity caused by growth,

and that the idiosyncrasy of small groups fosters innovative work environments more readily than large organisations, especially government agencies governed by a constantly changing parade of Ministers.

Concordia is consulting to the State Services Commission on a major project to focus the public sector on a far smaller number of goals that are collectively achievable and understood.

But he sees a problem for coherence that matches with this week's 2025 Taskforce's criticism of inefficient government spending.

"People back home (in the UK) are horrified when I tell them there are still 35 separate departments of government for a population of four million people, which is what you've got here. That's a hell of a resource unless you start bringing your capabilities together, at which point then that can be a good thing."

Among Aitken's more tongue-in-cheek tips for leaders: "dither more." Whether it be JFK at the Bay of Pigs or Barack Obama deciding Afghanistan war strategy, both have faced enormous pressure to decide quickly from an array of resources ruthlessly trained to be decisive.

"It's a hard signal to send, but there's a need for reflectiveness rather than fearing being seen to be weak for not knowing the answer immediately."

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