"I out led the leader"

Leaders don't have to have more pips on their shoulders to be the real leader in a situation.

Here is a true story of leadership I was privileged to hear the other day, where a leader 'out led' a more senior leader to the benefit of that person, the business in general and the person who 'led up'.

How often is the perceived threat to a senior leader turned into a negative experience for someone more junior? This can lead to a culture of fear, with poor requests being made and nobody making offers to move things forward.

Here is the story in the words of the person who 'out led the leader';

"I was asked to support another function in the business due to my expertise and was delighted to do so. I was keen to learn more about that department as well as share my knowledge in supporting another team and hopefully, benefit the business.

However, my experience was far from one of learning, sharing and shared business benefits. In my view, I was seen as a threat to the department I was working with – perhaps because they believed my knowledge would expose areas of weakness in that function that would reflect on the senior executive. After agreeing the brief and presenting an update whilst in the throes of the project, I was informed via email to cease working on it, and that I would be better placed carrying out basic administrative work thereafter.

My initial reaction was fury: mostly because my efforts had not been regarded, and because I was treated in a manner that made me feel dismissed. I saw fault in the executive leader and wanted to take the matter higher. I wanted to expose the person for what I saw – a poor leader and someone who was incapable of operating at the "C level".

I took some time to ponder and sought advice from a mentor. After many times of being asked the same question by my mentor, 'so what is really going on here?', I had a light bulb moment and realised the issue was mine in that only I could change the situation to lead to a positive outcome. Being angry and unforgiving was of no benefit to anyone, especially me. My mentor helped me to construct a future

conversation: one that would focus on my intention and share with the executive the sentiment and aim of my work.

So, I built up the courage to meet with the exec. I asked if I might share my perspective on the intent of my work and continued to relate all my reasoning in the conversation to my intent. Slowly 'the ice melted' in the conversation and the executive seemed to better understand where I was coming from, how I was able to partner with the function, and how I could assist due to my approach, expertise and intent. Having that greater clarity of understanding, combined with a simple apology for an ill-placed email, turned my initial fury into a sense of achievement – in fact, in that moment I felt fearless.

I am working more closely with the team, led by an executive who seems to want to drive forward, together. After much deliberation regarding my approach, I feel as though I out led the leader, not in a self grandising way, but in a collaborative, informed way: rather than continue to be angry (that's the easy option, right?) I took responsibility for my emotions, words and actions, and focused on another move instead: how to move the situation forward positively for all – and the most pleasing thing of all was – my approach worked".

How many in this situation might play the blame game and feed a poor culture of looking elsewhere to deal with a situation. Executive leaders can get things 'wrong' and in my view we all have a leadership responsibility to improve the situation by observing ourselves first.

We can ask ourselves in any situation, what am I feeling? What am I thinking? What do I want to say and do to move this situation forward postively?

We can take advice and listen to good counsel before taking action that is instinctive and potentially ill-conceived through an emotion of anger or resentment.

Ultimately to 'out lead a leader' in this instance or be a great leader, I believe it is our responsibility to feel our emotions, listen to ourselves and others before we take the action that will create a culture of support and strong outcomes for the company, the team and the individual. Yes, it is about having a vision and strategy and the ability to communicate that, however it is also about taking others where they might not have otherwise gone to deliver the outcome of the strategy. If you can do this, the

notion of being an effective leader will come in the assessments of others and they will follow you. "Leadership exists in the eyes and ears and emotions of the followers" (A.Sieler, Newfield Institute).

Observe yourself first, then decide, then act and then others will follow to help you execute the plan.

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