

Leadership lessons for and from a Chairperson

Three months after becoming Chair I found myself in the 'hot seat' as we stumbled into a real crisis in mid July 2007 that resulted in the Board making the decision to close the organisation from 31st December.

CTN quite correctly wants articles in its Newsletter to be supportive to other Chairs. My response to that is to state quite openly and honestly that this closure stuff is pretty scary if you are a Board member and especially if you are the Chair.

It is hard to deal with – sometimes it actually feels 'too hard.'

There is no point in pretending this sort of crisis is easy to manage – it is challenging both practically and emotionally for many people.

Make no mistake it has a heavy cost.

I suggest you have to dig deep and find skills you will not find being taught in the best business school in the country. People are involved and people are gloriously unpredictable. Indeed and paradoxically, that is simultaneously the joy and the challenge of being a leader.

At the height of the crisis during July and August I wrote down many of my thoughts and a small part of that is reproduced here in an abbreviated form - warts and all. If some of the language appears emotive that is because it felt pretty emotive to all of us at the time and that applies to both Board members and staff.

Here goes This is my summary of those black days.

We continue to manage our way through this problem making it up as we go along to some extent and drawing on our various experiences with help from legal and HR professionals.

We continue to make mistakes and if we think we have finally 'cracked it' I suspect we will be wrong. If we had thought for one moment we could have written a policy to deal with this sort of crisis and simply pull it out of a filing cabinet and implement it in a cold clinical way then we were wrong. The world of organisations just doesn't operate in that cold rational

way. We are talking here about people and emotions.

Here are a few lessons I've learned during this crisis;

- Always have a plan B even if you are very confident plan A is going to work.
- Ask the staff most directly affected what they think.
- The staff are usually 'ahead' of the Board.
- Don't listen to gossip – talk to people direct.
- Be aware there are political games going on at every level.
- Try to ensure there are no 'camps' even though there will be.
- Be open and up front about bad news.
- Tell people quickly and tell everyone affected at the same time.
- Walk away for a few hours and leave it – you need refreshing.
- Don't make assumptions and if you do ... change them.
- Be ready to be surprised with reactions.
- Admit you were wrong when you make a mistake – as you inevitably will.
- Just when you thought things were getting better they get worse and you have to keep going.
- Never give up.
- Have an understanding wife/husband/partner/family.
- Remember you have a life too.

Well there it is – I would be fascinated to hear from colleague Chairs about this article. It's always great to have feedback.

The biggest plus from all this is the incredible learning we have all gone through.

As I write this article in mid September the world has moved on a lot and we now have a good plan and effective processes set out to manage the closure now just over three months away.

Things are beginning to look much more 'stable' and we have moved from 'crisis mode' to a more measured pace with achievable targets set out and milestones in place.

Closure of any organisation is of course a negative outcome but if managed honestly and underpinned with open and effective communication it can also be a liberating experience for those managing the processes.

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