

Four types of inept leader

Andrew Gibbons

I am thoroughly fed up with the constant stream of advice we never see taken by leaders, so I offer some raw thoughts I consider deeply rooted in reality as to why all but a very few leaders at any level are totally inept.

My current favourite leadership quote is from Kouzes and Posner: "Leadership is a process not a position".

I believe far too many 'leaders' feel the title is enough – showing a distinct lack of ability to lead the 'process'.

So here are my brief thoughts on why so many leaders are totally incapable...

Over protected, uninformed

When I leave messages on the answer machine of a 'big six' utility company Director's PA's number I get return phone calls from the Executive Complaints people because 'that is procedure'. Then I hear the same Director apparently believing the nonsense his PR people have written for him whilst showing radio four's 'you and yours' team around carefully selected parts of the wonderful customer services unit.

Maybe he is a better leader than I think, just as likely, he is shepherded around by his aides, given little or no exposure to the realities of frontline employees, unaware and unable to reflect the truth, spouting nonsense written for him by those who feed him what he and they most want to believe.

I have now arranged a two pounds a month pay back of bills resulting from long overdue readings...this will be cleared when I am 98!

The 'leader' in question departed the organisation earlier this year.

Deluded

These 'leaders' see a very different reality to sometimes everyone else, simply all too often seen ploughing onward to the cliff edge and then eventually over it with too many corporate dependents in tow. Delusional leaders are sustained for too long by those that say only what they want to hear, and any who dare to challenge find that a very unpleasant option - so, no challenge.

Some, approaching a general election are coached to say things like 'that doesn't reflect what I know to be true', or 'your figures contrast with those I have seen' and so on, but most don't need help to see things differently from the rest of us...they are simply deluded!

Dysfunctionally over-ego driven

All leaders need a healthy ego that drives them to change things, hopefully but all too often not, for the better. These inept leaders differ from delusionals, as they know how it is and choose to disregard stark realities believing they will somehow make it to an impossible goal, wreaking havoc and causing huge damage.

Too few have it in them to walk away when they know they should.

Too many cling on to the trappings of power and status for so long that they do serious harm to the organisations they once led well, or at least better, weakening or at worst destroying organisations and the lives of people dependent on their competence.

Incompetent

Many incompetent leaders should never have got the role in the first place. A lot are poorly prepared and find themselves with challenges beyond their capability to deliver. Others manage fine until things change and they face new tests beyond their ability to achieve expected results.

Too many are kept in the role by those that put them there fearing their own selection imperfections will be exposed.

Some incompetent leaders get away with bluster, blaming others and distractions. Many remain in place for far too long, damaging organisations often beyond repair.

The 'Peter Principle' is indeed alive and well – far too many 'leaders' have clearly been promoted beyond their level of competence. That said, we never know what we are and are not capable of until we give it a go – remember Kevin Keegan, England Manager?

Clearly there are overlaps - many over protected and uninformed 'leaders' are kept from the realities of their role because they are incompetent, many delusional 'leaders' have malfunctioning egos. Just first thoughts, and totally against the norm, this is in part a kick out against the relentless 'three ways to be a perfect leader' offerings that for me, in over 30 years in this business are light years away from the harsh realities I have outlined above.

Final thoughts

It is not my intention to slate leaders – leadership is a very difficult role and performing this well has never been tougher.

That said, for all the leadership advice industry, the profound thoughts of the growing horde of gurus, and the vastly expensive leadership programmes in posh hotels and management centres – where are they?

More free downloads at www.andrewgibbons.co.uk