



8 Essential Qualities of Inspirational Leaders

The best leaders promote a culture where their people value themselves, each other, the company and the customers. Everyone understands how their work makes a difference and this helps to build a commitment to higher standards where everybody is always looking to do things better. An inspired and motivated workforce is essential for any business that hopes to stay ahead of the competition. But just how do you motivate people? What kind of leadership do people respond to? And how can you improve the quality of leadership in your business?

The Inspiration Gap:

In a survey of more than one and a half thousand managers, people were asked what they would most like to see in their leaders. The most popular answer, mentioned by 55% of people, was 'inspiration'.

When asked if they would describe their current leader as 'inspiring', only 11% said yes. The two attributes that people actually mentioned most often when describing their leaders were 'knowledgeable' and 'ambitious'. As well as this thirst for inspiring leadership, there's also evidence to support the idea that companies with inspiring leaders perform better.

The Sunday Times publishes an annual survey of the 'Best Companies to Work For', which is compiled from the opinions of the companies' own employees. One interesting fact is that those 'Best Companies' that are publicly quoted consistently outperform the FTSE All-Share Index. Five-year compound returns show a 5.7% negative return for FTSE All-Share companies against a 13.6% gain for the Best Companies. Over three years, the returns were -11.3% and 6.7% respectively while, in the last twelve months, they were 23.1% and 44%.

The 'Best Companies to Work For' have also performed impressively on staff turnover, sickness rates, absenteeism, and the ability to recruit good quality people.

The stereotype of the inspirational leader as someone extrovert and charismatic, is the exception rather than the rule. Looking at best practice across business, though some inspirational leaders certainly do fit this mould, a large number do not. Many are quiet, almost introverted. The following are some of the most commonly observed characteristics of inspiring leaders:

1. Strong Strategic Focus:

They are very good at ensuring that the business only does those things where it has the resources to do a good job and where it can add real value.

2. Lateral Thinkers:

They are particularly adept at drawing on experiences outside their own sectors and taking a much broader view than the norm. They look at things very laterally and encourage their people to do the same.

3. Vision and Communication:

An inspirational leader has a very strong, customer-focused vision of where the business should be going. Importantly they are also able to communicate their vision so that their people feel they own it and know where they fit into it. The best leaders are great communicators who prefer plain speaking to jargon.

4. Principled:

They are deeply committed, courageous, demanding of themselves and their people and confident, albeit often in a quiet and under-stated way. What singles them out is an exceptionally strong set of values built on honesty, openness and true respect for their people.

What makes an inspiring leader?

5. Reflective:

What distinguishes them is genuine humility and not being afraid to show vulnerability on occasions. This comes from regular periods of reflection and an unquenchable thirst for learning.

6. Risk Takers:

They have a marked tendency to 'bend the rules', take calculated risks, and, on occasions, be guided by their gut-feelings. They also tolerate this in other people, recognising that a certain amount of flexibility is essential to adapt to circumstances and make real strides forward.

7. Accessible:

They make time to get out and speak to people. This informal and personal contact is a very powerful motivator. Equally, when they are at their own desk, they aren't cosseted behind a wall of PAs.

8. Value Attitude:

They value skills and training very highly, but they also focus heavily on attitude, believing that, without the right attitude and motivation, nothing will be achieved.

So, why do these traits produce results?

Pay is only one component of job satisfaction. Other factors like respect and prestige can be tremendously important in making staff feel good about their jobs. The reason that inspiring leadership produces results is that it contributes directly to fulfilling many of people's emotional needs.

The following are some of the ways that best practice in leadership contributes to improved job satisfaction, motivation and productivity.

Why people respond to leaders

9. Being Listened To:

A business where only senior managers are allowed to 'have ideas', rarely achieves great staff satisfaction. Inspirational leaders ask for, and respect, what their people tell them about how to do things better, and they provide the resources to ensure that the solutions are delivered.

10. Being Involved:

Inspirational leaders involve their people in changes for them to be a success. They give their people the freedom and support to get on with the job. When you walk around these companies, there is electricity in the air – you can feel the energy and buzz.

11. Having Fun:

In successful companies, people work hard but enjoy themselves in the process. Fun is a great indicator that an organisation is innovative and is also a key innovation driver. At the '100 Best Companies to Work For' you see a lot of fun at work.

12. Trusted:

It's no coincidence that, when you ask people what it is like to work in an organisation run by an inspirational leader, they talk about openness, honesty, respect and trust. These firms can boast highly committed staff that has a great sense of responsibility to their work.

13. Being Appreciated:

Recognition is an absolutely crucial element of inspiration, and few things are more powerful, or simple, than a genuine 'thank you'. Inspirational leaders know that it's vital that people feel appreciated and valued, so they show their appreciation through extensive celebration of success – both formally and informally.

Summary:

The best leaders promote a culture where their people value themselves, each other, the company and the customers.

Everyone understands how their work makes a difference. This helps to build a commitment to higher standards where everybody is always looking to do things better.

Prepared by Michael Barker
Performance Development Group
michael@performancedg.com
www.performancedg.com
Tel: 0113 2288808

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