

## Practice Notes

### Visionary Leadership – Driving Post Covid-19 Success

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*“Visionary Business Leadership post GCC is taking responsibility for and caring for your employees, your customers and your environment.”*

In a recent article I had concluded that *post the Global COVID-19 Crisis (GCC), corporate success will be driven by visionary leaders who, along with teams of well-trained employees, will create processes that ensure sustainable products and services which in turn will create great moments of truth for their customers!*

This conclusion makes the case that while customer focus, employee focus and sustainability are the three key drivers ensuring corporate success post the GCC, it will require visionary leaders to navigate and drive these drivers through and beyond the crisis! Who are these visionary leaders and what does good leadership look like?

My favorite quote on leadership is *“Leadership is a responsibility. It’s not about being in charge. It’s about taking care of those in your charge.” -Simon Sinek*. The key takeaway from the quote is that leadership is about ‘taking care’ and in the context of visionary business leadership post GCC I would say the – *“Visionary Business Leadership post GCC is taking responsibility for your employees, your customers and your environment. It’s about taking care of your employees, your customers and your environment”*. Let’s look at all these three aspects of visionary business leadership.

#### Visionary Business Leadership is caring for your Employees

*“Wars may be fought with weapons, but they are won by men. It is the spirit of men who follow and of the man who leads that gains the victory.” – General George S. Patton*

A lot of research has been done to find out what makes a company great. What are the secrets of success? What makes a company world class?

We might be tempted to assume that great products or processes or technology makes great companies. But most research shows that it is the people that makes a company great. So, the best companies are those that attract the best employees. The best employees are drawn towards companies with a caring culture. A caring culture is created by caring leaders. Success post Covid-19 requires visionary leaders who genuinely care for their employees.

Richard Branson said, *“Take care of your employees, and they’ll take care of your business”*. Branson genuinely believes that people should be appreciated, praised, not criticized, and given feedback so they have a chance to do a great job. He goes on to say that *“The person who runs the company is critical. If you choose somebody who genuinely loves people and looks for the best in people, that’s critical and if you bring someone in who isn’t good with people then you can destroy the company very quickly.”*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pavel Krapivin - Sir Richard Branson's Five Billion Reasons To Make Your Employees And Candidates Happy Forbes July 9, 2018 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pavelkrapivin/2018/07/09/sir-richard-bransons-5-billion-reasons-to-make-your-employees-candidates-happy/#7c6434956710>

Leaders fail when they portray a total lack of empathy and caring for their employees. Lack of empathy in leadership becomes evident from the record rate of high staff turnover. An overwhelming majority of people around the world will agree that the 45<sup>th</sup> President of USA – Donald Trump is among the worst leaders of all time. One of the reasons for his failure is his total lack of empathy and caring for his employees and this is evident from the record rates of staff turnover<sup>2</sup> in his administration.<sup>3</sup> It is no surprise then that under his leadership the response of USA to Covid-19 was arguably the worst in the world. His lack of empathy and caring comes across very clearly in his response to the pandemic. In contrast the best response to the crisis has come from Jacinta Arden the caring Prime Minister of New Zealand. The good news for leaders today who lack empathy is that it seems to be a trait that leaders can develop once they are convinced of its efficacy in ensuring success. Though it would be too much to expect President Trump to become genuinely caring; The Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison is an example going from a leader lacking in empathy during the bushfire crisis to a caring leader credited with success of the Australian Covid-19 response.

Caring for employees normally starts with the hiring process and consequently the People and Culture team (formerly known as HR) play an integral role in good leadership. During the Covid-19 crisis, hiring may not be the primary concern of leaders — but ensuring that the morale and well-being of the employees is maintained during and after the crisis is significant. Terminating the employment of employees might be the hardest task of a caring leader. During the Covid-19 crisis there will unfortunately be many unavoidable terminations. A caring leader will not terminate unless absolutely necessary; and where necessary will ensure that this task is carried out with care and compassion providing the employee with whatever help is available that ensures their future success. And they certainly will not do it with the callous attitude which Trump uses in his TV serial which made him synonymous with the words ‘Your Fired’. As a leader, ensure the employees who you have to let go will carry with them a favorable impression of you and your organization.

Once good employees are hired, visionary leadership will invest in their continuous learning, ensuring that the team is always up to date while simultaneously refreshing and updating previous knowledge. Then a visionary leader will trust his employees and allow them to do their job resisting the temptation to interfere or micromanage.

Steve Jobs famously said “It doesn't make sense to hire smart people and tell them what to do; we hire smart people so they can tell us what to do.” Of course, a visionary leader will ensure that he invests in his team to equip them with the knowledge and skills that ensure wholistic success.

However caring employers will still be willing to take responsibility and have the back of their employees when things go wrong.

*“Leadership consists of nothing but taking responsibility for everything that goes wrong and giving your subordinates credit for everything that goes well.” — Dwight D. Eisenhower*

When you genuinely care for your employees you will lead by example. You will not ask your people to do something that you yourself are not willing to do. In Australia, we see all our leaders maintaining safe physical distance at all times. I have seen this often being flouted in other countries specifically in the US. It is not just the US President Trump but also his Vice President Mike Pence was heavily criticized for showing poor leadership by refusing to wear a mandatory mask while visiting a health care facility. For example, if you want your people to wear masks, set an example by wearing a mask yourself. If you expect your people to wear a uniform step out in the uniform on to

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/research/tracking-turnover-in-the-trump-administration/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/charts-white-house-turnover-breaking-records-n1056101>

the shop or factory floor occasionally to set an example. One of Australia's largest companies, Bunnings, has a policy which requires every single manager (even the CEO and the CFO) to wear the traditional Bunnings apron and work on the shop floor for a certain number of days every year. True leadership not only leads by example but also, and more importantly, true leadership can step into the role of its subordinates with ease and utmost professionalism.

Personally, I have evolved into a much more caring and empathetic leader over the years. In the last 2 corporate management roles that I have held, I have had the privilege to have been in charge of two excellent finance teams. I do not think my younger self was as empathetic or caring as I am now. Working from home (WFH) has suddenly become very fashionable and many managers are now discovering how productive and effective it can be. I had introduced regular WFH in my teams going as far back as 2005 simultaneously with the introduction of cloud accounting. In one of these companies, which regularly surveyed the happiness of staff in different teams; my finance team was the happiest in the company. Senior Managers in that team now tell me that the happiness of the team was a result of my caring for them. Simple gestures like buying them chocolates or coffee occasionally, made a big difference to staff morale during difficult times - they tell me.

If you want to be an effective leader become a genuinely caring leader. Understand that the success of your organization, especially post covid-19, will depend upon the people who work for you. You can motivate them and get the best out of them by genuinely caring for them. You cannot fake it; you have to genuinely care for your people. Like it is said about Richard Branson "you quickly realize that he has a high degree of empathy that you don't see too often. While some might give off the impression that they can turn empathy on and off like a tap, with him, it seems much more authentic. It almost feels like his mission is to make all people happy."<sup>1</sup> So my suggestion is for leaders to sow the seeds of happiness among your people and reap the rewards of success post Covid-19.

### **Visionary Business Leadership is caring for your customers**

"It is the customer who determines what a business is...The customer is the foundation of a business and keeps it in existence. He alone gives employment." - Peter Drucker in the 1970's published this definition of business in his book, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*.

There is only one valid definition of business purpose Dr Drucker emphasized - *To create and keep a customer*.

The Value chain of business starts and ends with the Customer. It starts with identifying what your customer needs and ends with satisfying your customer's needs. Consequently, as a visionary leader you will quickly realize that the entire value chain that supports your business is all about genuinely caring for your customers – it's all about customer satisfaction!

"So how is this mission of customer satisfaction achieved – primarily by getting the processes that drive it right! And how does a corporation get the all-important processes right – by making sure it has the right people in the right places to drive the processes. So, it's not profit or market share, stupid – rather focus on your customer and get the right processes and people in place to satisfy the customer – the profits and market share will automatically follow.

An inspiring true story of customer focus leading to improve processes and products is that of the late Sumant Moolgaokar who was CEO of the Tata Engineering and Locomotive Company (TELCO), who would forgo his plush five star office executive lunch every day to have lunch at small roadside restaurants (dhaba) frequented by truck drivers so that he could discuss the working of TATA trucks with the end users of the vehicle. He used the meticulous notes he took from these 'customer and product focused' meetings to improve on the vehicles that TATA produced. A great example of

Customer Focus leading to process and product success. This customer focus is probably what has helped TATA to achieve considerable success in the automobile Industry. It can be noted that in 2008 TATA acquired the iconic British company Jaguar from Ford and turned its fortunes around<sup>4</sup>.”

As a visionary leader who cares for your customers you will know your customer well enough to understand what they need and set about organizing the fulfilment of that need at a price that they are willing to pay.

Post Covid-19, this is not going to be easy. It will require a passionate leadership focused on the mission acting with speed and resilience combined with flexibility and agility plus all the other leadership qualities the visionary leader can bring to the table. But as long as leaders remain customer focused, aided by employees -- who share the same mission, vision and passion -- the organization has a greater chance of success.

Unfortunately, corporate history of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is rife with instances of myopic leaders sacrificing customer and employee welfare in pursuit of short-term profits. Johnson and Johnson in the US, the major car manufacturers of Europe and the big four Australian banks are all guilty of Corporate Myopia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century which I have exposed in my article last year<sup>4</sup>. The mindless pursuit of short-term profits has driven the once powerful USA into a basket case led by a narcissistic myopic self-interested President with zero interest in the wellbeing of his people. His inaction is responsible for the deaths of thousands of his countrymen. Covid-19 has exposed the myopic nature of American Capitalism where corporate greed has ensured a health care system unprepared to deal with the Pandemic. More balanced countries like Germany and some Scandinavian countries in Europe, South Korea and Sri Lanka in Asia and the two Anzac countries of Australia and New Zealand have all fared much better.

There is a lesson that Corporate leadership needs to learn from Covid-19 – that exploiting customers for short term gain is neither profitable nor sustainable in the long run. Long term sustainable value creation requires companies to put the interests of Customers above that of short-term profits. Sustainable value creation will only come from genuinely caring for your customers.

### **Visionary Leadership is caring for your Environment**

Enjoying life costs little, chasing a lifestyle is expensive! Our planet has enough to satisfy human need but nowhere near enough to satisfy inhuman greed. One of the lessons we can learn from the GCC crisis is that just like the Covid-19 virus destroys life by unsustainable growth, our unsustainable greed is destroying our planet. Sustainability is going to be the key to long term success post the GCC. The Covid-19 crisis almost completely demolished the Global economic order and our way of life. We can, and we will, eventually overcome this virus and things will get better. But the crisis of Global warming and wildlife/ endangered species trade on the black market will destroy not just our economies and way of life, but also our planet. This Covid-19 crisis has sent the world scrambling for a cure and vaccine. While global warming continues to do long term/permanent damage, what challenges will the next virus bring? Is there a vaccine to prevent climate change?

Visionary leaders will look on the Covid-19 crisis as a wakeup call and learn from this experience. They will take this break from ‘business as usual’ as an opportunity to rebuild their business sustainably.

The Covid-19 crisis has presented organizations with the opportunity to reboot and reset their businesses. Visionary business leaders will take the time that this crisis has afforded and use the opportunity to make their business sustainable. The Sustainability focus should cover every aspect of

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<sup>4</sup> Dr Chris D’Souza – Corporate Myopia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – On Target 1<sup>st</sup> July 2019/ <https://www.cmawebline.org/ontarget/corporate-myopia-in-the-21st-century/>

the business from the product throughout its entire life cycle from womb to tomb and include every aspect in the supply chain process required to make it a winner in wholistic business.

### **Is there a Choice – Employee, Customer or Sustainability?**

No, it's not a matter of selecting any one or two of them – visionary leadership will understand that they go together hand-in-hand. You can't have one without the other. All three are equally important. Richard Branson said that he put employees first and customers second. I am not sure that he was expressing himself very well as by focusing on the wellbeing of his employees he was ensuring that they would put the customer first. And likewise, if you genuinely care about the wellbeing of your employee and customers you cannot do it without also being genuinely concerned about the planet which is their home. So, it is not a matter of choice or of putting one above the other. Visionary leaders will realize that all the three will be equal pillars that are the foundations of successful business going forward.

Jan Carlson's in the 1980's when he was CEO of SAS Airlines coined an interesting term 'Moment of truth' as the point where the customer of an organization comes into contact with its frontline employees. My theory is that it's not just frontline employees but all employees of the organization being focused on their customers is what creates this 'Moments of Truth' which leads to Corporate success. But as I said earlier when you focus genuine care on your Customer and your Employee, you cannot be unconcerned about the safety and sustainability of the environment in which they exist.

### **A new post Covid-19 World – make it better, brighter, fairer and Sustainable!**

Pre-Covid-19 our lifestyles were not sustainable and neither were our business practices. Our lifestyle was consumeristic, and our businesses were myopic in pursuit of short-term profit maximization. Both the lifestyle and businesses that promoted it were driven by greed. Growth cannot be without limit otherwise it becomes a virus like Covid-19 – and eventually destroys the business. However, in our frantic and mindless pursuit of growth we had lost sight of our destination. We were like the absent-minded professor who jumped into a cab and shouted, "Hurry! At top speed!" As the cab sped along, he realized that he hadn't told the driver where to go, so he shouted, "Do you know where I want to go?" "No, sir," said the cabbie, "but I'm driving as fast as I can." Like the cab, before Covid-19 our business world was speeding along at breakneck speed unmindful of the damage it was doing to our planet and without knowledge of its destination.

The covid-19 crisis might well be a blessing in disguise for businesses as it has given them a chance to reset and reboot. Visionary leadership will take advantage of this break to plan to rebuild a business focused on the trifecta of employees, customers and sustainability.

*"The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present.  
The occasion is piled high with difficulty and we must rise with the occasion.  
As our case is new, we must think anew and act anew."  
– Abraham Lincoln*

*"I don't measure a man's success by how high he climbs but how high he bounces when he hits bottom...."*

*Pressure makes Diamonds  
– General George S. Patton*

