A QUESTION
of
LEADERSHIP

KERRY A. BUNKER
Bunker is a former senior program associate at CCL in Greensboro. His responsibilities included managing programs aimed at helping leaders respond to the challenges of transition. He holds a Ph.D. degree from the University of South Florida.

Leaders must be tough enough to make difficult, bottom-line decisions that serve the overall needs of the organization. Being tough involves being decisive and unafraid to take a stand in the face of public opinion or strong resistance.

However, leaders must also make such decisions with sensitivity to the impact and consequences for others in the organization. Failure to do so can erode loyalty and trust, as well as morale and motivation—at the very time when leaders need them most.

The ability to be empathetic encourages loyalty and trust—even understanding of and support for difficult decisions. Being empathetic involves taking the perspectives of others into account when making decisions and taking action. It means being able to accurately anticipate or at least recognize the emotional impact of decisions and actions.

Empathetic leaders are able to put themselves in other people’s shoes, consider individual limitations, set aside preconceived notions, and value people as well as results. The ability to be empathetic is also grounded in self-awareness; it’s hard to be empathetic when you are not in touch with your own emotions and reactions.

For many leaders, empathy can be incredibly difficult to get right. Many leaders have been taught to shut down their emotional connections when making difficult decisions. They worry that if they let their soft side show, it will be viewed as weakness or a lack of commitment to their decisions. My experience in working with leaders has shown the exact opposite to be true in times of significant change and crisis. People want to know that their leaders can be tough, committed, and decisive, but they also want them to be human—and humane.

Overdoing toughness while underdoing empathy creates fairly obvious and, unfortunately, common outcomes. The relentless drive for business results buries concerns for people, and the leader appears to be inhuman and uncaring. An environment of alienation and fear is created. Learning is stifled because people are afraid to take risks or make mistakes, and the voices of contrary data and opinion are silenced. People lose commitment and focus, so business results are often compromised as well.

On the flip side, minimizing toughness while overdoing empathy can hinder change and be a huge disservice to employees and the organization. Both the leader and the company can be perceived as soft and wishy-washy. With such a lack of firmness and pressure, business results are often viewed as less important, and the organization can become directionless.

When leaders temper toughness with genuine empathy, vision and direction are clear. Targets, goals, and expectations seem high but attainable. Employees know how to get where they’re going. They feel valued and heard, and leaders are viewed as genuine. This happens because such leaders are equally comfortable in addressing two apparently paradoxical needs:

They don’t shy away from difficulty. Leaders who strike a balance between toughness and empathy hold themselves as well as others accountable, even in challenging situations. Demonstrating perseverance, they accept difficulty but do not use it as an excuse or crutch. Challenge is faced directly, with a close eye on business results.

They pay attention to emotions. While driving for results and change, these leaders listen carefully, with an honest intent to understand. They recognize and respond to the emotional impact caused by their demands and decisions. They stay connected to their own emotional reactions to the organization and its situation so they can authentically communicate with and relate to others.
What important leadership competencies do leaders typically overdo or underdo in times of transition?

MICHAEL WAKEFIELD

Wakefield, a former senior program associate at CCL, is a principal in leadership development for Amazon.com. He holds an M.A. degree from Lone Mountain College.

Today’s organizations demand a challenging combination of individual talent and collective ability and effort. Leaders must develop the right level of self-reliance along with appropriate trust in and reliance on others.

Self-reliance involves a willingness to take a lead role and to do things yourself when they are important. Leaders who are self-reliant have a great deal of confidence in their own skills and abilities and are willing to step up and tackle most new challenges as they arise.

Trusting others involves being comfortable with allowing others to do their part of a task or project. Leaders who trust others are open to input and support from colleagues and friends. Such leaders respect others and demonstrate trust through a willingness to be vulnerable in their interactions with them.

By overdoing self-reliance and underdoing trust in others, leaders shut down the interest, talent, and contributions of others. People become frustrated when they perceive that they are not needed or respected. They may seek to change jobs, and talented employees elsewhere in the organization may be reluctant to work for an overly self-reliant leader.

Leaders who overemphasize trust in others run the risk of abdicating authority or leaving a group leaderless—struggling for direction, stability, and confidence. They tend to create a team or organization that lacks objectives and is reactive rather than proactive. Employees may feel that it is easier to go around the leader than to work through him or her.

When leaders are able to combine self-reliance with trust in others, a win-win atmosphere is established. When leaders are able to combine self-reliance with trust in others, a win-win atmosphere is established. People believe they have meaningful work and understand that the important contributions they make will be valued. And the leader doesn’t feel isolated and alone in tackling emotional and operational changes. People feel free to speak the truth in providing input, guidance, support, and feedback. This collaborative, confident approach contributes to individual and organizational learning that would otherwise not occur.

When leaders effectively balance self-reliance and trust in others, they exhibit three crucial behaviors:

They have high confidence in individuals and their ability to deliver results. These leaders are able to genuinely place trust in others who have been encouraged and supported in their work and development. By ensuring that others are given appropriately challenging assignments and opportunities, the authentic leader places trust in others and, in turn, can choose when to be self-reliant.

They take a team approach to handling difficult issues. The greater the complexity of a situation, the more important it is to draw on the expertise and perspectives of others. A senior leader, accustomed to being the “expert,” often feels exposed and vulnerable in doing this at first, but the rewards can be substantial.

They can step in without micromanaging or undermining. When a pattern of trust has been established, leaders can judiciously step in and advise, adjust, and if need be, override. This is different from constant micromanaging and undermining. It is, in fact, the appropriate use of the authority bestowed by position and experience.