



500 WORDS ON LEADERSHIP & DEVELOPMENT

BREXIT

The leadership lessons we can learn

Whether or not you agree with the result, the UK's Brexit vote to leave the European Union in June 2016 shocked the world. The day before the event, pollsters were predicting an 80% vote to Remain in the EU. **How wrong those pollsters were.**

Over three years later and with the political wrangling's and delays that have ensued, are

there leadership lessons we can take from the vote that has divided Britain and inspires strong feelings on either side of the debate?

Brexit should be a wake-up call for all business leaders. The vote showed Britain's leaders were hugely out of sync with its voters.

Could the same thing be happening with employees in your company?

Are you involved on the front lines with your employees and customers every day, or are you holed up at headquarters? **The answer may well determine your company's success.**

Companies up and down the country have been attempting to prepare themselves for the withdrawal from the EU but it has presented a unique set of challenges that many have found difficult to deal with.

Whether you want change or not, there are times in business where it is inevitable. **As a leader you need to equip your company** in order to cope with it and thrive.

One of the main challenges that face politicians in the UK is how to bring a polarised country back together again. Business leaders, like political ones, when facing such a divisive situation, should consider **going back to the drawing board** – listening, taking stock and feeding back to their followers to keep them on board. Business leaders who ignore their people's feelings do so at their own peril. **Unhappy employees lead to disengaged workplaces and mediocre results.**

To turn around these attitudes, business leaders need to engage and inspire their workforce. Instead of focusing on cutting employee costs and benefits, they should be investing in communicating vision and purpose, bottom-up idea generation and creating an empowering culture.

Investing in your employees also makes them feel secure at a time of insecurity. If finances are tight then consider other ways you can make your employees feel invested in. It doesn't always have to involve big budget outgoings. Something as simple as a weekly round table discussion can ensure employees feel listened to and nurtured.

In hindsight, one of the reasons the politicians misjudged the mood of the country with regards to Brexit was because they invested too heavily in sophisticated polling research rather than just listening to the electorate.

In business, to understand your customers you need to talk to them. **As a business you need to move away from only relying on balance sheets and profit figures.** These only give you one part of your story, and a short-term view at that. You also need to get down on the ground and gather real-time customer feedback. Only then will you get a 360-degree view of how your business is perceived by your audience.

Complacency is tantamount to business growth suicide. David Cameron freely admits that he was not prepared for the Brexit result. As one consultant for the government put it: "Ministers really believed people would do everything their prime minister told them to."

Ultimately Brexiteers campaigned, successfully, for the electorate to 'take control'. And that's what a lot of those who voted to Leave felt they were doing. In business, **the best leaders are those that keep a finger on the pulse of the workforce.** They don't feel complacent about how their workforce feels. They aren't complacent about how they will grow profits and they are never complacent about where they sit within their market.

Even with the result of the upcoming election almost upon us, there still does not seem to be a clear path ahead for Brexit. Maybe over the next month this will be clarified but from a business point of view, the lessons that can be learned are:

- **Ask your team** how willing and able they are to drive change and in what direction;
- **Get out of your office** and talk to those interacting with your customers, in any fashion;
- **Listen** to your audience;
- And **never ever be complacent.**

Yours,
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