

Elevating leaders from ‘good’ to ‘outstanding’

Research from the Charity Commissionⁱ in June revealed that public trust in charities is at an all-time low. They say that there has been a “significant” decrease in the public’s trust and confidence in charities, and the sector is now less trusted than the ordinary man in the street.

One-third of people questioned said that their trust in charities has decreased over the last two years. Of these a third attributed it to general media stories, one third to specific coverage of how charities spend donations and a fifth said that they were unhappy about “pressuring tactics to elicit donations”.

Not good news for the sector which relies heavily on the general public for donations. Now more than ever before charity leaders need to be at the top of their game to win trust back. But what does it take to elevate a leader from just ‘good’ to ‘outstanding’ and how can charities ensure their leaders are amongst the best?

The Work Foundationⁱⁱ asked this question and conducted qualitative research to unearth the detail behind high performance leadership. It is the first piece of research looking at the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘outstanding’ and it gave intellectual street credibility to the differences.

What is striking is that they uncovered clear differences between good and outstanding leadership. There is now evidence to support a systemic, people-centred approach to high performance leadership. This is a paradigm shift for most leaders who remain focused on the numbers and has implications for all organisations seeking to improve their performance.

The evidence from the research strongly suggests that truly people-centred leadership leads to more effective performance. Outstanding leaders think and act differently to their peers. They are focused on sustainable performance, purpose and meaning, knowing that people are the only route to its achievement and that they themselves enable others through their influence on those around them.

They also have broad horizons and a deeply connective philosophy, with an ability to see how the people and systems in an organisation fit together and a vision that extends from the past, through the present and into the future.

The behaviour of outstanding leaders comes from the following three principles:

They think and act systemically: they see things as a whole rather than compartmentalising. They connect the parts by a guiding sense of purpose. They understand how action follows reaction, how climate is bound and unravelled by acts, how mutual gains create loyalty and commitment, how confidence provides a springboard to motivation and creativity and how trust speeds interactions and enables people to take personal risks and succeed.

They see people as the route to performance: they are deeply people and relationship centred rather than just people-oriented. They give significant amounts of time and focus to people. For good leaders, people are one group among many that need attention. For outstanding leaders, they are the only route to sustainable performance. They not only like and care about people, but have come to understand at a deep level that the capability and engagement of people is how they achieve exceptional performance.

They are self-confident without being arrogant: self-awareness is one of their fundamental attributes. They are highly motivated to achieve excellence and are focused on organisational outcomes, vision and purpose. But they understand they cannot create performance themselves. Rather, they are conduits to performance through their influence on others. The key tool they have to do this is not systems and processes, but themselves and the ways they interact with and impact on those around them. This sense of self is not ego-driven. It is to serve a goal, creating a combination of humility and self-confidence.

The economic climate in which charities are currently operating is extremely tough. In difficult times this can lead charities into thinking they need powerful leaders who have a controlling, target-driven approach. However this can be counter-productive and it's clear that outstanding leaders act from a different set of principles.

Charities need to be smarter at recognising leadership talent and identifying people with potential to become outstanding leaders whose behaviour is more people focused. They also need to understand how this required behaviour can be developed and what type of management development will work best for their organisation.

This will not only improve the charity's performance long-term but will help the sector as a whole win back the public's trust.

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Cass CCE launches its next breakfast seminar series on 'Outstanding Leadership' on 4th October 2016, which runs over nine modules until 17th July 2017.

These seminars bring to life the acclaimed Outstanding Leadership research through a series of bite-sized modules that allow attendees to directly apply their learning to the workplace.

The seminars are aimed at chairs, trustees, chief executives and senior leaders who have an interest in developing their leadership ability within their organisation.

The full series cost is £495 for non-profit organisations (£945 standard price). Individual modules can be booked for £65 each (£125 for-profit).

For more information visit:

<https://www.cass.city.ac.uk/research-and-faculty/centres/cce/professional-development/outstanding-leadership>

ⁱ http://www.civilsociety.co.uk/governance/news/content/21981/public_tr

ⁱⁱ http://www.cass.city.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0013/117031/ExceedingExpectationexecsumm.pdf.pdf