

Preparing to leave from the first day

If invited to pen a letter of congratulations to a newly appointed CEO, how would you frame it and what would the content of the letter reveal? Congratulatory platitudes dripping in sugary coated ego-stroking isn't what's called for on the occasion of the appointment, and if to have any real value, should instead challenge and inspire the new leader. TomorrowToday.biz director of storytelling Keith Coats suggests that the best counsel would be to advise this new chief to "prepare to leave".

"One might be tempted to label this a strange message for one who is still unpacking in the corner office, but it is by far the most significant wisdom worth dispensing," says Coats, who is a recognised expert on leadership development and a gifted facilitator, executive coach and futurist.

"I have made it a habit to give the same advice to new parents: prepare your child for leaving. It seems odd to be offering up messages around the departure of a child from home when just a couple of days or weeks old, but I believe it is never too early to be planting that message in the soil of parenting. Some have recalled how odd they found the advice at the time, but how it helped to shape their attitudes and behaviour as parents. This same philosophy can be applied to the role of leader who is in reality parenting the organisation into maturity."

Paradox

Paradoxically, 'preparing to leave' is a pertinent message for every leader from day one.

Coats believes that leaders who fail to do so grow into dictators who cling to power and position because they have nowhere else to go. He says that they become the sort of leaders who resist change and are easily threatened and usually surround themselves with those who tell them only what they want to hear, or who echo what they themselves hear. "They are the kind of leaders who become trapped and snared in holes of their own making."

Former General Electric CEO Jack Welch, when reflecting on his role and influence on the corporate giant, said that these would only become apparent after he had left. He spoke of leaving a legacy.

Popular author Scott M Peck summed it up succinctly when he said that the measures of a successful life were to have loved, lived and to leave a legacy. Leaders who understand these imperatives are leaders who, from the moment they are entrusted with the responsibility and gift of leadership, plan to leave. They deliberate about what they will leave behind and then intentionally strike out in that direction. They build environments and teams that will thrive without them and spend their energy developing the human and logistical resources to make this possible.

"Such leaders are usually very different from those who fail to follow such a plan. They always seem to have time for others; they have a welcoming manner about them, one that invites connection and conversation; they listen well because

they understand that they can learn from anyone and everyone; they ask and invite questions; they leave you feeling buoyed rather than overawed by their importance, agenda and mood. These are the truly great men and women, those leaders who understand that their role is one of preparation and so marshal their energy and resources accordingly. For an example of this we need look no further than Nelson Mandela. A great man with the power of his influence because of his embodiment of the above description,” says Coats.

"Wrong direction"

“Dare I suggest that if you feel that others around you are so dependent on your presence that preparing to leave seems incomprehensible, then your leadership is heading in the wrong direction?”

A wise bishop who, when he turned 60, announced that he would relinquish his local and national leadership positions with immediate effect. He tells the story of how he had written a letter to himself 10 years earlier, when he was 50. The letter was to be opened and read on the occasion of his 60th milestone. The letter revealed his perspective at the age of 50 on senior clergy who had hung on to their own leadership positions long after they should have vacated them. He vowed that he would not fall victim to the same error and wrote that, at 60, should he find himself in the same position, he would immediately resign. (In fact his letter contained 10 reminders to himself, based on his perception and foresight.)

This took great courage, for no doubt he would have been strongly tempted to listen to those voices from both within and without encouraging him to ‘stay a little longer’. He is still actively engaged in his work and without question could still have been in a position of national leadership. Does he, with hindsight, regret the decision he took so many years ago? Absolutely not!

“Prepare to leave. It is good advice for any leader. Is it easy? Of course not, but then who ever said leadership was easy,” concludes Coats.

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