

Traditional Leadership Approaches in IT?

Do Traditional Leadership Approaches Work in IT?



Up until quite recently, the commonly held view of working in a business environment was that it was hierarchical, middle management obsessed, and filled to the brim with red tape. Whether that was accurate or not, in recent times, things have started to change. This has more than a little to do with the rise of the technology industry as a cornerstone of our working environments, expanding its reach a long way beyond Computer Science graduates and hobbyist programmers. Companies like Google, Facebook, and Amazon are famed for their company cultures, which put an emphasis on making all employees feel like part of the bigger picture. Gone are the leader/follower archetypes of the past, with terms such as “servant leadership” coming en vogue. Watching the IT landscape, a rapidly advancing and changing environment that is at the forefront of our new knowledge economy (where employees know more about their task than their managers do), it is clear that the sector is in a prime position to lead the charge for leadership change.

The Weaknesses of Traditional (Authoritative/Directive) Leadership

Most of us would have worked under this leadership style at some stage, a style of, essentially, “because I said so” management. This is the old school, traditional model going back centuries. A style where the success and/or failure is dependent upon the one person to drive things through. While this style does have its benefits (it’s especially useful in times of crisis), it also has a number of shortcomings.

Let’s face it, unless you are the person who is the authoritarian or dictator, this style of leadership is not that much fun. It doesn’t empower employees, with the focus being almost entirely on doing as you’re told. There is little required in the way of thinking, and instead success is achieved by effectively

following instructions, which makes it a difficult environment for innovation to flourish within.

Another key issue is communication. With communication essentially being one way, the assumption is that the people in charge are best suited to make every decision. While leadership should take responsibility – at least to a significant degree – it's also important to know where your knowledge ends. In these environments, tasks are deferred for approval constantly, which makes for inefficiency, and means there is little room for higher level process improvement.

The calibre of leadership also becomes a limitation in these scenarios. Outside of just making the decisions, employee motivation is entirely down to management due to the style of communication involved. If this motivation isn't there, then it tends to undermine the whole system, with performance often suffering as a result. This can also provide a platform for negativity and conflict to grow internally.

How IT Has Changed Things

IT is a disruptive industry by nature. This means that innovation, agility and creativity are key to driving forward – things that are often stifled by authoritative leadership. Because of that, we've seen a number of alternative approaches to leadership be showcased at some of the world's biggest companies. Use of alternatives like servant leadership, "**distributed leadership**" at Google, "**transformational leadership**" at Facebook or a "**holacracy**" as trialled by Zappos are becoming more normal as companies strive for a better way forward.

On a more local level, we've seen the same kind of impact – albeit potentially for different reasons. As New Zealand isn't filled with the likes of the Facebooks and Googles of the world, our IT sector is dominated by small to medium businesses. In these smaller organisations, the authoritative style simply isn't as practical when it comes to working with a smaller team, as well as not promoting growth as effectively.

As an industry with a tendency to lean younger, IT is the industry at the forefront of our current generational shift. With digitisation bringing sweeping change to the world and the way we work, we're not starting to see digital natives take up high-level roles in organisations. Workplace priorities are changing and leadership approaches are starting to reflect what employees are looking for at work.

Being Careful in the Future

It's often tempting to look to implement these new working styles just because they seem to be leading edge methodologies. "Hey, Google does this, Facebook does that, it has to be great, right?" while potentially sounding like good reasoning, doesn't mean it will work for everybody. Even the case of Zappos' "holocracy" can be seen as a cautionary tale, with **attrition heavily increasing** after its introduction.

The key here is to not disrupt or innovate for disruption or innovation's sake. In some organisations or departments or teams, authoritative leadership will be more effective due to the nature of the work or the make-up of the teams. There isn't anything wrong with that. You must ascertain what is right for your team or business.

Bringing change as such into an established organisation can be a long, tedious and painfully drawn out affair, so it is not surprising that a lot of these implementations are attempted in the start-up and SME world. While it might be an exciting thing to talk about, even (in fact, you could argue, especially) the more democratic or laissez faire leadership styles still require a framework around it. Without it there are risks of an organisation becoming chaotic, putting businesses in serious trouble – with our recent **Sourced Report** showing that start-up churn is a serious issue for small businesses in the competitive IT market.

At Sourced, we love seeing innovation in play and are intrigued at all the different models, which are turning up in our environment. Change is possible and achievable, if you are brave enough to try. If you're inspired to try something different to the norm, or you're looking for someone to lead change in

your business, call us here at Sourced. We'd love to hear about it and talk to you about what we have seen.