

Case study: Courage in the face of adversity

This is a case study collected in 2012, as part of a research project by Alana McDonald, to identify and make available leadership experiences from LDC alumni.

The purpose of the case study is to stimulate reflection and discussion on your leadership practice. A case study provides an opportunity to ask yourself 'what would I do in the same situation?'

If you have any comments or feedback, contact toolkits@ldc.govt.nz

Legislative change causes distress

I was senior manager for a Public Service department that had been directed by Government to change a piece of legislation to accurately reflect practice in the current economic climate. By consequence, there would be a number of affected parties, who were likely to be put at risk of significant financial hardship. I was selected to be the face of Government to outline the changes in legislation that would be happening to impacted and affected parties. When I initially promulgated the message from Government, it resulted in a number of individuals visibly distressed and outlining to me over the phone the significant issues they would face if legislation were to be changed. Some would face bankruptcy, others would be unable to leave the situation and therefore felt entrapped. I subsequently relayed these messages back to Government; however the position was not to be changed.

Meeting met with hostility

I arranged a meeting between the affected parties, and myself, the chief executive and technical specialists to represent Government. I hoped this meeting would provide an opportunity for all parties to come to an understanding of the legislative changes and implications they have. On commencement of the meeting, I centred the podium to begin speaking and was subject to a battery of taunts and name-calling. This was much more vociferous and antagonistic than I had come across before with this group of people. It was hard for me to continue to speak to the policy and at the same time remind myself that the derogatory comments were not directed at me personally, but to the situation. The discussions that ensued were very heated, and the fact that I was not from the area affected by the policy change perhaps could have added to the aggravation of the situation. I tried to maintain a clam demeanour throughout the meeting, and was definitely glad to have the meeting finished.

Positive informal meeting

Following the meeting I retired to the bar and carried on the conversation with affected parties in an informal setting. Shifting to the bar in this informal way, gave me the ability to talk one-on-one, and surprisingly became the most productive outcome of the meeting. They were able to speak to me as an individual, and whilst still a representative of Government, it enabled them to clarify aspects of the legislation and policy they needed to live with.

Whilst the overall outcome did result in a reversal of policy in favour to the affected parties, I have never been tested quite so far in my career previously to articulate a position in the face of such adversity. I was reminded, in a very real way, of the importance of acting with utmost integrity.

Questions

- What leadership challenges did this person face during this case study?
- Have you had to use courage in this fashion to advocate for something to those who are opposed? If so, what did you learn from that experience?

Messages from a leader

Keep neutral

- Your job is to represent Government, so you cannot give any hint of political bias whether you disagree with Government policy. You are there to serve advice on behalf of Government and when a decision is made you have to get on with it. Make sure you stay as neutral as possible; it enables you to maintain relationships with your stakeholders.

Have intestinal fortitude

- You are there to front the situation, so must take all that comes your way. Don't take criticism or misdirected insult personally. Whilst you need to be empathetic to cause, you also need to remain humble and clear of your role. Maintain integrity at all times.

Stay flexible

- One evening I ended up staying longer in a bar area with some of the disgruntled local owners. This proved to be the most productive aspect to forming relationships with affected parties, as allowed them to see me as a person, not just the face of Government. So remember to remain flexible, so you can take advantage of opportunities like that to solidify relationships, and gain credibility and trust.

Transparency is important

- Throughout the policy development phase, we worked quite hard at meeting with affected parties, taking every opportunity to meet with them and speak at their conferences. Our role was not only to assist Government, but to also communicate with affected parties ensuring they understood Government policy. This also allowed them transparency and assurance that we were not misrepresenting their views to Government.