

Case study: Collaborative vs. direct leadership style

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

Leadership challenge

I was brought into an organisation to develop new capabilities using existing teams, skills and resources. My leadership challenge was to bring together three disparate groups of people; research, operations policy and communications; and to form a new design capability and refocus the group functions and skills to align with the organisations newly formed strategic plan. I considered myself lucky to have a clear mandate from the top. I had to develop and put forward a business case, but I had minimal external support at my disposal. I used a value chain as a way of understanding how the relative functions and skills aligned to the corporations. This helped the removal of silos and encouraged cooperative working and underpinned a collaborative culture within the group. I engaged staff throughout the process by seeking out and testing their ideas, so that by the time the consultation document was produced, there were no surprises for staff. I am a consultative leader by nature, and feel you can show staff due respect and help them accept change by taking them with you on a journey.

Establishing new capability

When establishing the new capability, I recruited people with experience in the new capability. In doing so I was able to leverage off their skillsets to develop others. Just prior to 'sign-off' of the business case and implementation of the new structure, a significant earthquake occurred, which distracted the efforts of staff. We were not able to engage with the rest of organisation to the level desired, so I put the implementation on hold. We needed to get sign off for various components of the new capability, but the impact of the earthquake on people, meant that this was almost too much for some to take on board. After a month, we resumed action in developing the capability and made some great headway, demonstrating the value we offered to the organisation.

Second restructure—more challenges

About this same time external drivers resulted in more changes to the organisation's core business. The changes impacted on my group and were driven by the economic downturn. So while I was given more functions I was asked to reduce the overall size of the group when it didn't even feel like the ink had dried on the page. There I was going through another restructure process, when I had just finished the first one. What I found really challenging as a leader was knowing that the reduction in capability was a short-sighted win, when it seemed apparent to me that the loss in skills would be needed to support future strategic changes.

New leadership style challenges

Again there was no external support to work through the structural design. My boss informed me that I was to take a direct approach with this restructure. It forced me to adopt a leadership style that I was unfamiliar and uncomfortable with, and created some resistance and uneasiness between myself and my boss. I found it extremely difficult moving from my previously collaborative leadership style to one that was simply direct and clinical with conflicting rationale for change.

The challenge was doing what was asked of me but in a way that I could still stand by my values and enable my leadership team to still feel respected. I was not allowed to discuss any of the changes with any of my staff until the consultation document was complete and agreed. I drew heavily on the support of my peers and trusted advisors to get buy-in at an executive level for some of my ideas around the change. I needed to balance what was asked of me with sound rationale in support of the changes so that it wasn't just about reducing numbers.

It was very difficult working through a process where the desired result felt intuitively wrong. It was very hard pushing back and took a lot of courage. In the end I got an outcome I could work with, but not without impact and pain. At times I felt undermined and very unsupported. You need to be able to talk to people you can trust for a sanity check, be prepared to be unpopular, retain your integrity and trust of your people and know the point at which your inability to do your job means it's time to move on.

Questions

- What leadership challenges are faced in this case study?
- How important is the ability to lead using your leadership style as opposed to one that you are directed to take?

Messages from a leader

Give yourself a timeframe

- When you start to feel undervalued and that you are no longer enjoying the work you are doing, give yourself a timeframe. Don't blame yourself. There are often politics at play of which you may be unaware or have no influence over. Establish how much you are prepared to go on with and when you will move on. Otherwise you will burn out and grieve for the things you would have worked hard at building within the organisation and compromise your leadership values.

Keep your external networks

- I relied heavily on my external networks to provide me with support and advice during the latter phases of restructuring I was involved in. They provided me the encouragement I needed to keep going. Engage with your external networks regularly and help keep yourself in check. The landscape does change and you are often not that alone!