

Case study: People, people, people

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

I was brought in to a ministry that wasn't financially stable where my role was to deliver an organisation viable for the future. There was significant pressure from the Minister to achieve results, yet on entry to the role there was no data, no financial projections and had an ineffective corporate services function. The organisation had never been reviewed before, so there was a lot of resistance and scepticism about my intentions as chief executive.

An insular and closed organisational culture existed, where coasting and complacency were common place, seeing no requirement for change. Of a relatively small organisation size of fewer than 50 staff, they were inundated with clubs which had created multiple 'in' and 'out' groups. They had existed in such a way for so long, that when clients or the Minister had complained, the perception was that the client or Minister was wrong—not the organisation. There was no sense of a wider team, working towards the same goals.

As a technically focused person, I concentrated on creating an efficient structure as a way to tackle some of the organisational issues. I held whiteboard sessions with my management team in order to identify structural efficiencies, and was stunned at the lack of open-mindedness and willingness to change from some key staff members. As a result of a lack of progress, I drafted a terms of reference that identified and removed some of the management team and created a more efficient organisational structure.

During this process I had also identified a Tier 2 manager who showed potential and a drive for change; and appointed her as director. What I did not know at the beginning however, is that she was largely discredited by staff who saw her as of lesser value in the organisation, playing 'well above her field'. It was the director's role to help me roll out and communicate the structural changes underway, and unexpectedly, an avalanche of negativity pursued. There were threats of legal action from staff who complained that the second tier manager had no relevant previous experience, and there was significant pressure on me to stop what I was doing. Staff began complaining that I was too 'policy-

centric', that I didn't understand the past, and that I was making redundancies based on performance rather than for structural efficiency.

The Director was beginning to burn out and had begun to waiver from the barrage of staff bullying. This then prompted me to contact a previous mentor, who had significant experience in this area. I contracted this previous mentor in to help review the structure, pull it apart and provide advice on how to make it happen. Bringing in an external consultant created a second frenzy of blame, negativity, resistance and anger. I started holding face-to-face meetings to communicate the change on a fortnightly and sometimes weekly basis. There were times that I began doubting my communication, despite rehearsing and preparing, and whilst I truly believed in what I was doing was the right thing, doubt began to trickle in. For almost five months it felt like despite having communicated a clear message in my mind, staff weren't hearing what I was saying, and picking apart every word I used. I began to think staff were purposefully trying to frighten, confuse or intimidate me.

Following this, I decided to attend a persuasion and influence course hosted by LDC, and hired a new communications expert to assist me in delivery of my messages to staff. These things helped me reframe my messages, and I was able to apply these new concepts to the roll out of proposals to staff. It was important that I began to communicate a more 'people-centric' approach to my messages, empathising with them, but being clear on the intent and objectives I needed to achieve. The day I announced the proposals, was the day power appeared to have shifted back to me. I felt like I was back in the driver's seat again, and announcing my decision to staff seemed to settle some people down.

This process was a truly difficult and lonely time. In saying this however, I am glad it happened, as I have taken so much away. The culture has changed now, and there is a 'yes' attitude to delivering advice and help. I can confidently say the organisation is value adding 100 per cent.

Question

- What are some of the key leadership lessons from this case study?

Messages from a leader

Don't be afraid to be personal

- The Director had told me that staff didn't think I cared about their feelings, and how this change was going to impact on them personally. I cannot understate the importance of showing a 'human-side.' You need to communicate empathy towards them whilst still maintaining your control as a leader. Leadership is after all, about people.

Don't linger on a decision

- The day I announced the decision, was the day the power shifted back to me. If I could do it again, I would do it a lot faster. It was torture for people and only fed the insular cultures within the organisation.

Keep a mentor close

- You need a safe place to vent, to keep things real, and keep a balance. It was life-saving to have someone there who could keep me on a reality-check and provide me with the frank, and reassuring advice that I needed.