
When Convictions Blind Leaders



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Many leaders are passionate individuals, often highly driven by deeply held philosophical convictions or values. This can make them very influential but can also cause them and others to lose sight of potential trip wires.

I once worked with a very smart and passionate executive, Philippe, from a major American MNC in the medical industry. He was a rising star who had been hired away from a competitor to help the company expand its business internationally. Having lived and worked in the U.S., Europe and Japan and served as an overseas missionary in his early 20s, he was well travelled and had a global outlook on life.

Philippe was an adamant proponent of globalisation and it wasn't just something he believed in professionally, but also personally. He'd successfully helped another company in the same industry globalise before taking on his new role and he knew it was critical to the long-term success of his new company.

When he started at the firm, he hit the ground running.

He put in place a number of new structures and new reporting lines. He reorganised teams and got them to focus outside of the United States. He also started a large scale executive education programme to get people out of a domestic business mindset. He travelled to emerging markets, such as India, to explore possibilities for expanding global sales from the bottom of the pyramid and he built successful momentum for the firm's international expansion. Observing him from the outside, he seemed to be doing all the right things. But other senior leaders in the firm were uncomfortable with the pace of change and the exploration of new business models with which they were not personally familiar. His drive and his passion which ignited the interest and imagination of middle-level managers with whom he worked closely meant that the middle of the organisation began to outpace those at the top. It wasn't that the management disagreed with his vision, or what he was doing, but they were worried about the speed of the major changes and what it might mean to the traditional, very lucrative business where the company had excelled for decades.

It didn't take long before misunderstandings and disagreements flared about the pace and scale of the company's overseas growth and three years after joining, they parted ways.

What went wrong?

Philippe had three key traits that are widely considered a powerful mix of leadership qualities. He was courageous and action-oriented, able to jump at opportunities when he saw them; he had confidence in his beliefs and stuck to his guns when the going got tough; and he had charisma, which helped him gather people behind his vision. But these traits of good leaders which are widely espoused hardly scratch the surface and complexity involved in using these skills wisely.

Spontaneity and the ability to spot trends before they happen is a powerful trait. Great entrepreneurs often have this quality and some of them change our world. Steve Jobs is one obvious example of someone who was not just able to see the future, but to seize it and shape it. But this unique ability has to go hand-in-hand with an awareness of the not-so-obvious dangers.

Multi-dimensional values

Globalisation was in Philippe's blood, but this led him to colour other peoples' views of the world, too. When individuals, especially leaders, have a strongly

held value or belief, there is also a real danger that they will underplay the potential challenges that could get in the way of their plans or even the potential downsides of carrying it out because of their strong value attachment to the outcome.

There is also another commonly missed dimension to values-based leadership that leaders stumble over and that's the values of those around them. One of Philippe's biggest blind spots was that his deeply-held beliefs were sometimes in conflict with those of the management team. While he thought he could convince them of his approach using clear data and logic, he did not explore the executives' deeply held values, including the importance they placed on quality and their low tolerance for risk.

Many writers extol the benefits of values-based leadership and there is empirical evidence to back them up. For example, Jim Collins demonstrated in *Built to Last* that organisations driven by purpose outperformed the general market by 15:1 and their peers by 6:1. While purpose is important, it is not enough if the purpose and values of the key stakeholders are in conflict. Even with a strong sense of personal purpose, leaders need to work to create alignment so that their ideas both get the initial traction they need and are supported longer-term, to allow the changes to take hold and influence results.

Getting buy-in

Charisma is also a useful tool in the short-term, a catalyst to motivate and rally people behind your vision, but charismatic individuals also have a "push" style of leadership. They are driven by the need to convince others of their mission and this can obscure the potential obstacles. A "pull" style is also needed to complement the sense of drive in order to understand the mindset and context of the people you're working with and detach from the philosophical mandate you think you have.

What could Philippe have done differently?

Philippe had assumed very early on that the people who'd brought him in would be his supporters and he'd be able to draw on their power and legitimacy to make his vision a reality. In hindsight, continuously asking questions and not making assumptions about the political workings of his organisation or the levels of support he would receive, would have prevented a lot of friction.

Philippe's deeply held personal beliefs should also have been tempered with a layer of mindfulness. Edward de Bono, the author and consultant famous for his book *Six Thinking Hats*, propagates putting on the "Black Hat" in situations where judgments have to be made. The "Black Hat" is a devil's advocate perspective to spot the difficulties and dangers that could lurk in your assumptions and decisions. It does not mean that you abandon your vision but you take the opposing perspective to proactively spot any potential problems that may be lurking ahead.

Most importantly, when you're pursuing something that is philosophically important to you, your mind narrows and there's no way to tell how others see your vision. Resolve should run hand-in-hand with the ability to step back from the precipice of self-righteousness.

Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't*, identified what he calls "Level 5 Leadership", a combination of humility and fierce resolve. Where fierce resolve is values-driven, humility serves to counter leaders from getting too carried away. While many management gurus tell leaders to be humble and "genuine" on the ground with their troops, humility in this regard means being open to the pitfalls and blind spots. Those with deeply-held philosophical beliefs or convictions, not just leaders, are prone to rejecting new ways of thinking or disagreeing with anything that challenges their vision.

While beliefs and values can lead to world-changing innovations, they can also lead to ultimate destruction. The higher leaders go in organisations, the bigger the splash, positive or negative.

Many leaders enjoy the high stakes games that they play - living on the edge gives them a rush and the possibility of real failure is intrinsically motivating and exciting. One way to benefit from the innovations without falling into the abyss is to make sure you've got someone who will listen to you and who hates being on that edge, a devil's advocate or even a mini board of advisers that can help you see the possible pitfalls on your pursuit of greatness. Too much caution or "Black Hat" thinking and nothing much happens, but used in the right doses it can help visionary leaders from going over the edge to their own (and often their organisation's) destruction.

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