



LEADERSHIP IN TURBULENT TIMES – NO SAINTS REQUIRED

Fi Emberton and Ian Spence of culture change and training consultancy Embervision have worked intensively in the UK over and have seen at first hand the pressure placed on leaders during a downturn.

Crisis leadership is not about expecting an unachievable saint-like state of perfection from you. Instead, it's about recalibrating your leadership style to get you through.

Be clear about your outcomes and benefits

When the going gets tough, it's tempting to panic and grab at any money-making idea or lose sight of the whole point of your organisation's existence. Offering inappropriate services that have nothing to do with stated strategic organisational outcomes or eroding the core products has resulted in many cases in a downward spiral of lost custom, support and funding. Clarity around core business means when faced with changes such as new funding models you make strong decisions that will not erode those core resources and services for which you are known by your community and funding providers.

Prepare for a potential crisis well ahead by firmly and positively positioning your organisation in the eyes of your community and parent organisation. How? Firstly, articulate your vision (your description of the business you are in), such as information, literacy and community space. Describe the results of access or use of your services to your clients clearly, for example increased employability, school readiness, social connectedness or student retention rates. Secondly, communicate how your services will deliver on the intended outcomes of and for your parent organisation. These are the benefits, such as attracting and retaining business or staff to the parent organisation.

In this way your team and community will understand how your strategies, resources and services support key organisational and or community goals. Regardless of whether that's improved employability for local students or research that improves the bottom line for a special library, if this is well understood you will be better positioning your library or information service in readiness for any downturn.

TIP: Discuss with your team the benefits your library service brings to your community and organisation. Keep asking 'so what?' to get to the root benefits and outcomes. Communicate these widely and powerfully.

Be aware of the wider world

In our profession, we spend a lot of time with our colleagues. This can have a downside if it's not balanced with awareness of the rest of the world. Great leaders are not only well informed about their own professional issues but also about those of the wider world. They read widely, network with other professions and are ready to take advantage of opportunities.

It's a trap to fall into a narrow zeitgeist, or 'group think', leading to a sense that downturn and cut-backs are inevitable. We've seen library services taking cuts that other departments would simply refuse to accept. We've also seen struggling leaders resort to whinging about lack of money rather than redirecting their efforts to better communicating the value of their services to build support.

TIP: Don't accept cuts as a done deal but if you are faced with them, let the situation ignite your assertiveness. Renegotiate the deal to ensure critical critical resources and services are protected – and articulate what will happen for the parent organisation or community if they aren't. And keep a watch on the wider environment for trends that might threaten your organisation in the future.

Communicate widely and candidly

Great leaders can be at their most inspiring during a crisis - often using storytelling to paint a picture that helps the team better relate to the change - and using tone and body language to build trust. Rather than only sending out factual memos or policies, they use a range of styles to motivate and inform the team.

The best leaders are those who listen openly and, importantly, without judgement to staff concerns and ideas. Yes, this does mean stifling tuts, sniggers and eye-rolling. In times of change and downturn it is valuable to explain decisions honestly and to consult only with an optimum number of people rather than everyone. As library workers we often discuss issues endlessly. In a crisis, if you cannot consult because of time or other external pressures, explain this to the team.

We see strong leaders as balanced between the two extremes of getting the task done and being friendly. Taking an interest in people is a must but so is getting the job done.

Tip: During a crisis, communicate candidly with everyone – but don't let the communication process delay decision making. Make those tough decisions and explain them.

Retain the best

As a crisis looms, it is essential that issues are tackled and that poor behaviour is not tolerated. Dealing with people firmly and privately (what some call 'courageous conversations') will reduce team frustration and prevent you losing your best staff. Remember, restructures are not the way to exit staff as it's often the poor performers that remain.

Tip: To prepare for tough times, deal with any behaviour issues now and monitor your team to reduce any tensions and to maintain performance and motivation.

Fi Emberton and Ian Spence

Embervision
fiona@embervision.cc