

TIM COLLINS TALKS NEWS

“Time, Ladies and Gentlemen TIME – Please!” Tim Collins asks whether old models and ways of leading really work for 21st century law firms and clarifies where to look in the jungle of good, bad and ugly advice.

My Fault

“I wish that I knew all I know now when I was younger” – is so very true for me! In this article about leadership, I aim to share some learning about the mistakes I’ve made as well as some great ideas and concepts I’ve been discovering. I’ve always considered myself to be a natural leader and people have trusted and followed me. So despite benefitting hugely from studying psychology, gaining my formative training with P&G, and learning from and working with some great people, how did I end up failing?

Since I walked the plank I’ve been giving that some serious thought and conducting fresh research and learning about leadership. However, I’ve not come across any staggering new revelations but lots of simple common sense that has been available for years.

I guess there are two key lessons from my time managing a barristers’ chambers. Firstly, it is much easier to manage a business up rather than down, and secondly when there is a breakdown of relationships, or lack of trust, it becomes impossible to lead. But sometimes that slap in the face is the

wake up call you need. I realised I had to quit, it was no longer healthy or good for me and I was too caught up in trying to keep things going to be able to lead effectively. But as soon as I’d let go and decided to leave I could immediately see what needed to be done.

Learning

Over the last 18 months, I have been attending numerous university business school seminars, conferences, watching Ted videos, reading articles and blogs, and meeting some inspirational characters. There are huge challenges facing many firms and enormous pressure on leaders. Do our old models and ways of leading really work for 21st century firms? There is a jungle of advice out there, the good, the bad and the ugly. So where can we turn for help? We need help to step back and create the space to think and frame some questions. This could prove to be invaluable. Additionally, leaders need to learn and develop. There are some great resources and ideas readily available.

When I was introduced to David Broadhead from Partners in Management, we clicked immediately and I signed up for his brilliant 21st Century Management Course. I wasn’t disappointed. Subsequently, David and I co-presented a seminar for Leeds Law Society and realised we had a fresh take on leadership and management that both challenged and resonated with our delegates.

The Opportunity

We are information rich, and yet increasingly time and decision making poor. We seem to be working harder and harder just to stand still. Work is becoming more fraught and a lot less enjoyable. We don’t even have the time to ask ourselves “why?” We’re too



busy just doing. We know the market is fragmenting while our universities are producing thousands more law graduates every year. We have apprentices to add to the ranks of paralegals and businesses looking to cherry pick the most profitable work. More resources are being tied up to comply with the ever-evolving regulatory requirements. Technological developments mean that we can be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information and data, which in turn is more complex to manage. Some clients expect instant responses for minimum costs, plus the banks are wary of the sector.

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Accentuate the Positive – Positive Enquiry

Have you ever had an appraisal where you forget most of the positive and encouraging feedback while the

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“suggested improvements” grew in your mind? With a little time, they probably grew into unfair criticisms. And that was what you remembered.

Often when consultants and coaches work with firms, they focus on identifying the problems and suggesting possible solutions. They will typically frame questions such as: *What are the three most significant changes and challenges that have impacted on your firm in the last two years? Had you anticipated them? What's coming next? Are you ready for it?* These are perfectly valid questions, but they focus on the potential problems and feed negative/pessimistic viewpoints?

But if you were asked: *When you are treated well how do you do respond? What are the 3 best things you and your colleagues have done in the last 3 years? How can you build upon your positive successes? How can you lead your team to respond to future challenges?* Which set of questions do you think are most likely to illicit the most constructive answers? Australian Work Futurist Jeremy Scrivens has some fantastic examples of the power of “Positive Enquiry” and how to really engage people.

“Command & Targets”, No - “Coaching & Trust”, Yes Please!

Back in 2006 David Maister had a great article in *The American Lawyer* asking the question “Are Law Firms Manageable?” In it, he argued that it is almost impossible to manage or lead a law firm as the lawyers are trained to see problems, risks and this generates a guarded mindset which mitigates against building trust. Many firms are still run on 20th century industrial management thinking with the classic command and control hierarchies and the obsessional reliance on targets and measurement. And, some people are surprised that Generation Y lawyers are less engaged. What would happen if you trusted them, didn't hammer them when they made a mistake but praised them for taking the initiative?

How would your firm look if you genuinely wanted the best for your colleagues and gave, and were open to receive honest feedback? We often expect people to be like us, to see things the way we do – do we really want clones? No matter how great you are, it would simply stifle innovation, change and become life-sappingly boring. I love the old African proverb “I am because we are” - so we need to learn to trust one another. We are challenged, stimulated and learn hugely from other people – diversity is a genuinely good thing.

Inspiration, Transparency & Sharing

I've not yet come across a law firm where I'm thinking “wow that's a great model – I like the way they're working”. I've seen a number that make me wince but I have also met some great lawyers who are swimming against the tide trying to make a difference. However, I have also met some great people working in other sectors and think we have a lot to learn from them. Some of you will have come across the plain and yet colourful speaking Simon Biltcliffe (MD of Webmart) espousing his “northern values” of honesty, directness and trust.

He challenges and encourages us to learn from history, to keep things simple, engage all staff, to innovate, and share learning, recruiting talented, diverse people and training them have been critical to Simon's success. As a leader, his key function is to set the moral code for the business and promote transparency so that everyone knows and understands how they contribute and that they are valued. Trust is critical and everyone is empowered to take decisions by two guiding principles:

if your mum would be proud of you;

if you are content for your action to be in the public domain.

Apply common sense – align the right people to do the right things to achieve your targets. Give training using the best and most appropriate suppliers (many are free). Create an inspiring and varied workspace that is a great place to work. Give your best people the biggest opportunities – this will create the maximum added value. Crucially be very tolerant of failure. Share information and data on staff performance (the gain and the pain) – so everyone is accountable with and to each other.

Give people in your business and those you work with 3 things only – which must be aligned:

1. An intellectual return
2. An emotional return
3. A financial return.

Call to Inaction

Designer Steve Edge is totally right when he says: “throw one ball at someone and they'll catch it, six and they'll drop them all”. So many times, I hear of and see people developing great plans, investing considerable resources and doing nothing. We have to let go and step back. Most of the great leaders I have met make time, often for half a day each week to step back and make time to read, listen, watch, think and be inspired by others.

If 60% of business is “knowing, liking and trusting” then why not start with yourself? You can then cascade this to your colleagues, staff, suppliers, clients and competitors. You then have a foundation to confidently move forward from. You are able to start asking the more important questions for your firm of how and why rather than just “Are we hitting our targets?”. In my situation, I'd lost my perspective and reacted to each development and challenge and in effect misspent a few years of my life. You may be the senior partner, a partner or team leader but in 10 years' time will you finally step back and think “I enjoyed that and helped some great people do some great stuff” or will you have just clung on and hit your targets?

Peter Drucker famously said “We now accept the fact that learning is a lifelong process of keeping abreast of change. And the most pressing task is to teach people how to learn”. My advice is: do create some time to...

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