

## Could Your Team Survive 69 Days Underground Under Your Leadership – Ask Yourself The Question(s)?

You'd have to have been somewhere as inaccessible as the Chilean mine to have missed the enthralling story of the 33 miners' incarceration and subsequent valiant rescue. And in talking to friends and colleagues, there were few of us that weren't moved as, one by one, each miner emerged to claim his freedom. And now as the dust is settling on this story and the journalists are putting their pens away, it struck me that there were lessons to be learnt in leadership and teamwork for us all. Some copper nuggets so to speak....

While the situation of your company is (hopefully) not as dire as that confronting the miners, today's world of deep recessions and CSRs means that striving to keep your organisation on track, upbeat and productive can certainly feel life changing if not life threatening. In the mine, the battle was to keep the miners from being deeply demoralised in the face of possible doom – no doubt, it can sometimes feel like that in your organisation as you strive to keep spirits and morale up when the corporate outlook is tough.

### **A Common Goal**

OK, life in a corporation shouldn't necessarily be a case of life or death but what emerges from the Chilean experience was the positive impact of a unifying vision – to stay alive. It points to the value of your team being clear about what the end goal is; of having an intense and unambiguous clarity about it; of the goal having obvious benefits for all, that in turn breed buy in, commitment and self discipline.

So ask yourself the questions:

- What is the goal that unifies your team?
- Is it unambiguous?
- Do your people recognise the benefits to them as individuals?
- Is it obvious that it would be better served by everyone being on side as opposed to just a few?

### **A Leader Who Was Prepared To 'Step Up'**

This gets personal if you are a leader. There are conflicting stories as to whether it was Urzua, the foreman in charge when the roof came down, or Sepulveda the extraverted optimist, who should be credited with being the binding force that held the team together. Whoever it was, despite the pressure, he demonstrated an ability to lead in an authoritative but intuitive manner. He recognised the importance of his men having a purpose to each day, allotting them individual tasks all aimed at achieving the goal. He orchestrated rules and boundaries and procedures designed to create a sense of normality and order, a feeling of being in control not just at the whim of nature. He worked to support his crew emotionally and spiritually not just physically and intellectually, paying attention to the psychological states and the power of their religious values as a sustaining force. Despite what must have been overwhelming pressure, not just as being the nominated leader but also because of a need to control and contain his own personal fears ... the leader stepped up.

So ask yourself the questions:

- What do you pay attention to when leading your people? The targets, tasks and bright ideas or do you also have regard for feelings and values, for work life balance?
- Do you create order? Do people know what is permissible and what isn't?
- Do you yourself actively engender a sense of purpose and personal value in each and every one of your people?
- Do you keep your own doubts to yourself and focus on communicating positive and realistic messages?

### **Clear Responsibilities That Demonstrate Individual Personal Value**

I was fascinated to read that Urzua wrote a job description for every one of the 33 miners. It mimicked an organisation! Heads of Strategy (working with the outside engineers to plan the exit shaft) Communications (videoing life in the refuge and communicating it to the waiting world, Health and Safety (checking the quality of air and for any potential seismic movements, Sales and Marketing (writing the story that will be sold to the media upon their rescue), HR (ensuring that individuals received daily counselling and provided spiritual services for those who felt the need) – even an Entertainments Officer who wrote poetry about their ordeal each day and recited it at night for their enjoyment.

The point being that it was recognised that we work better when we have a role which is explicit and has clearly defined responsibilities and outcomes. It is often said that we have two overriding needs in life – the first one is to feel that we are good enough. The roles were designed to make the miners feel that they had an individual role to play and that this role, most importantly, was an authentic, vital and valuable part in achieving their goal.

So ask yourself the questions:

- Do your people have clear roles and specific values that obviously add value?
- Do your people have clear roles and specific outcomes that are valued by the organisation?
- Are all roles regarded as being of equal value to the organisation?
- Are people supported in their innate drive to be good enough?

### **Making People Feel Valued And Liked**

The second overriding need that I refer to above is the need to feel liked and/or loved. It was interesting to note that maintaining the individual miner's sense of self esteem on this level, has been crucial throughout the crisis. Therefore, ensuring communication with loved ones was a crucial element of managing their spirits. It was deemed an essential part of maintaining resilience. Gallup's research on positive workplaces, which highlighted the importance of having a real friend at work, seems to me to reflect the need for an emotional connection that is evident in our story.

There were strict shift patterns established during the time the miners were trapped – including for physical exercise, rest and relaxation. Socialising was probably difficult to avoid(!) but fun and games were encouraged as also team events such as watching the football! Taking care of yourself physically and mentally was a non negotiable, with miners even having to have daily counselling sessions with psychologists on the outside.

So ask yourself the questions:

- Is manifesting feelings acceptable or unacceptable in your organisation?
- Is work life balance paid lip service too?
- Would you say people were friends in your team? Do they play together as well as ‘pray’ together?
- Are people encouraged to take care of themselves?

### **Rules with consequences**

Rules were very definitely required and adhered to. It helped that the individuals would have accepted that they were needed and were there for their benefit. And there was an interesting little story about when some of the miners objected to their daily counselling sessions – on the basis of machismo 😊. They rebelled and refused to participate in them – whereupon the psychologists on the rockface stopped the TV streams and other forms of communication! The miners agreed to recommence their sessions. A clear case of immediate and impactful consequences.

So ask yourself the questions:

- Do the rules and procedures in your team reinforce the values and behaviours that will achieve your goals?
- Are your people clear about why these values and behaviours are essential?
- Are there any consequences for failing to demonstrate these values and behaviours?
- Is addressing poor performance or bad behaviour on the ‘too hard’ pile?

### **Planning For The End**

When change is increasingly ‘business as usual’, it is difficult to get people to let go of the past. For these miners, the accident is doubly difficult. It marks a period in their lives that will never be forgotten, for better or worse. And it also marks the day they lost their jobs. However dangerous the mine was, reports say that they were eager for it to stay open as it provided them with a living and a better living than many other mining jobs in the area. Some experienced relationship conflicts as a result of being trapped in the mine – to the extent that you couldn’t help wondering if they were likely to be scared of coming up, given what might be there to greet them! So it was fascinating to read that each miner was given a tube in which they could place any mementoes of the 33 days that they wished to keep in perpetuity. A memento to mark the end of one traumatic period of their lives and their re-entry into a world which has most certainly changed and a future that was as yet undetermined.

So ask yourself the questions:

- Do you understand why your people cling to the past? What it means to them?
- Are they clear what is an ending and what is a beginning?
- Do you treat the past with respect and understand what they have invested in it?
- Do you ensure what worked in the past, is carried forward into changes in the future?

### **And Finally, Do You Look After Yourself?**

Much is made of 'the psychologists' and what they said or didn't say to the miners; what they insisted upon and where they flexed their approach. May be the measure of their advice is that the 33 came out alive, reasonably fit and without falling apart? Sometimes, when the buck stops with you, it can feel fairly lonely. A coachee of mine put it perfectly when she described a leader's need to look after yourself as being akin to the instructions you receive on an aircraft. Put your own oxygen mask on first, as only then will you be really fit to look after your team.

So ask yourself the questions:

- Do you know how to look after yourself?
- Do you ask for help?
- Do you listen to the advice? Do you act on it?
- How do you get 'fresh oxygen?'

The points I make above are not the only ones that can be made about leading teams in difficult times but based on the Chilean epic they represent the pillars of a good game plan.

One last thought... where was the FD down the mine?! Not sure if there was one but apparently they did hire an accountant to handle their finances if they got out!

**Mary Clarke**

**16<sup>th</sup> October 2010**

**mary@stickychange.com**