

Pride – a deadly sin for leaders?



Pride, and excessive belief in one's own abilities, is traditionally thought of as the first of the seven deadly sins. And in business it can be VERY destructive. Excessive pride risks disregarding the competitor, the product, the shareholders - and, in particular, the customer.

British Airways prided itself on being the 'world's favourite airline'. Pride got in the way of BA understanding the new customer propositions offered by Ryanair and Easyjet, both of which are very valuable businesses.

According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, 'proud' comes from the late Old English word 'prud', which probably derived from the Old French 'prude' meaning brave/valiant (11th century).

A fine line

The line is fine between someone being brave, valiant and being arrogant. Many of us will know the phrase 'pride goes before a fall' as a paraphrase of a passage from the book of Proverbs, in the Hebrew and Christian Bible, but the concept is repeated in all the world's major religions. In Hinduism, Ravana, an evil king who was killed by Rama, avatar of Vishnu, exhibited the sins of pride and lust. In Islam, arrogance is also forbidden; Muhammad said: "He in whose heart there is as much as a grain of arrogance will not enter paradise". In Taoism, pride and greed are human errors.

So how do effective business leaders use pride positively?

Vision of pride

The first thing is to articulate a vision for the business that allows followers to be proud to stake their futures to a goal that is congruent with their own goals. Clive Woodward said that England won the Rugby World Cup in 2003 because the team – the team on the field, on the side of the field and even the lawyers and other back office team members – did a hundred things one per cent better than everyone else. Woodward had set the highest of goals and the team had staked their individual futures to a goal which together they achieved.

Effective leaders believe in themselves and in the attainment of their vision. They are self-confident and this confidence is born of pride of a positive not negative flavour. Gandhi was brave, valiant and ultimately self-sacrificing in his vision of an equal society; this vision provided the moral underpinning for the non-violent behaviour and actions of his many followers.

Richard Branson is visibly proud of the business he runs and of its people. In his many and varied daring PR stunts, he shows courage; in his business relationships with BA, he has positioned himself as valiant David taking on Goliath. People can associate with him and, therefore, support his stand. As a business leader, he aligns himself with his staff and, as a result, they are willing to follow his vision and leadership. He has always said publicly that, if you treat staff well, customers will be well taken care of, so his commitment to his people is evident. Almost the first thing he did after the recent Cumbria train crash was to thank the driver of the train for his bravery.

Prêt-à-Manger team members are proud of every element of the experience they provide their customers because, in large part, their company leaders are proud to lead what at one level is a simple sandwich-making business.

So pride is not necessarily a deadly sin of leadership; the most highly-effective leaders proudly reach out to people through their vision, their humanity and their courage to take on almost impossible challenges.

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