

# Business leadership and idealism



It is surprising in business discussions how often the notion of idealism is bundled with the terms gullibility and naïveté. Idealism seems to have become a disparaging term used in direct opposition to focus, leadership, strength, etc. It seems normal to dismiss idealists as nit-pickers in the way of pragmatists who want to get the job done.

While *raising the bar* or *benchmarking* excellence are common boardroom expressions, how often are we irritated by those who dare to challenge, question or suggest the high road? It is almost with a tremendous burst of smug energy that we decide to save their issues for another day, with a “let’s move on with real work!”

This is strange considering how the general public love people who stand up to the establishment. We have an enormous appetite for documentaries, TV offerings and movies such as *The Insider*, *Erin Brockovitch*, and *All The President’s Men*. Similarly, whistleblowers such as Sherron Watkins, the former Enron accountant, are handsomely paid to tell and retell their stories on speaker circuits around the world.

Are we not forgetting that the real life protagonists are idealists... men and women who risk possible rejection, job security or worse, to pursue truth and fairness? Perhaps lauding the results of idealism after the fact is more comfortable than the considerable risks involved in speaking up and going against the daily flow of any given operational process.

Politicians are particularly prone to sacrificing idealism in their pursuit of power. All too soon youthful ideals give way to deceitful pragmatism. Campaign promises are carefully worded to garner as many votes as possible.

And the frequency of about-turn policies is startling—opinion polls seem the critical factor in policy evolution. It is often hard to distinguish party standpoints, so prevalent is this phenomenon. Rather than putting a stake in the ground, parties flail around trying to appease people across the board. Little wonder the public regards the terms innovation and change as meaningless.

We have seen recently how President Obama’s bold health care initiative might sadly be watered down because the potential price to be paid for alienating large sectors of the electorate, big-business, party financiers, et al, is not considered pragmatic. Too bad for the millions of Americans who cannot afford basic health care.

In contrast, prior to WWII, an idealistic Winston Churchill was vilified as a warmonger, even by his own party, for tirelessly haranguing the House of Commons to the threat Nazi Germany posed to an unprepared Britain. “Naïve”, “in his dotage”, “negative”, “to be got rid of” were just some of the terms used to scornfully dismiss his political tirades.

Yet do we not owe a great deal to people of his ilk?

For me, idealism underpins true leadership. If a leader is someone who chooses to serve others, then surely going with the flow is the last thing we should expect leadership to reflect. A leader has the awareness and insight to identify business action requirements. Decisive initiative will ensure that, however unpopular, the issue is brought to the attention of the right people in good time. A strong sales pitch will then secure buy-in to whatever course of action is recommended. Would not a leader’s vision then pivot on a high degree of idealism, identifying what needs to be done and choosing to act, despite the risk?

Service-oriented idealism in the business and political world is perhaps the critical motivator that fuels the dedication, awareness and accountability that drives individuals to notice the potentially discordant notes, red flags and clues that

signal disaster. We reject the input of the folk who have the courage to go against the grain at our peril.

The Oxford dictionary cites “romantic; unrealistic; utopian; quixotic;” as synonyms for idealism. I prefer the definition of a close friend, who sees idealism as: “The pursuit of the basic principles of right and wrong as guiding life principles”.

We surely live in a cynical world if striving to live by this principle is seen as impractical. If we think about it, perhaps we just prefer the easier route—doing nothing, hoping that some idealist will step up and take risks on our behalf.

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