



## **Where have the quality leaders all gone?**

Leadership in action is urgently needed.

*This article draws on examples of political leadership, comparing recent events with those of a generation ago, and then sets these against a checklist of leadership characteristics sort after by big business and government.*

At this time of geopolitical turmoil and great complexity including an intractable human disaster in Syria, Brexit / EU's stagnating experiment, and our own recent Australian 'non result' election, the paucity of individual and collective leadership have been a constant. Only last week Ban Ki Moon, UN Secretary General [lamented](#) "many world leaders care more about retaining power than improving the lives of their people."

What can we learn from complex political events and can they inform us on how to be better leaders for our team, clients, family, and community?

### **Political settings of leadership**

On the recent death of a former French Prime Minister, Michel Rocard, Australian former Prime minister, Bob Hawke, stated that world leaders of today just are not up to the standards of a generation ago.

Bob Hawke worked closely with Michel Rocard, in the early 1990s to kill off an international convention that would have opened Antarctica to resources exploitation. To achieve this goal they had to reverse six years of negotiations on a deal that was all but agreed and backed by heavyweights - USA and the UK. It took them two years of complex negotiations building coalitions to push through the Madrid Protocol.

Asked to compare leaders in an era where basic reforms seem impossible, Hawke states that today's leaders are not up to the task. "The fact is that we are in a unique time, it is the first time since the Second World War when there

is [not one outstanding leader in the world](#). To get things done you have to have capable people around...with that (depth) of initiative and capacity."

Meanwhile, on the recent Australian federal election, the Victorian Liberal Party president, Michael Kroger has lashed out at his own parliamentary leaders blaming inadequate leadership for their party's poor results. Kroger laid the blame for the federal government's disappointing election result firmly with the Prime Minister and his Treasurer. He pointed to a "[lack of economic leadership](#)...and a period of policy confusion" as the key reasons the party performed so poorly. From "a 56-44 result...to where we are level. We didn't take the opportunity to take control of the economic leadership in the country...which is the Liberal Party's number one brand equity" Mr. Kroger said.

### **Some basic leadership qualities we all expect**

From this critique by their own party peers we see that in politics, as in the corporate sector, the need for trust, consistency, decisiveness, and being authentic can lead to the creation of leadership 'brand equity'. As voters and business colleagues we talk about liking or at least respecting a leader or not. We all want to build an emotional connection with our leaders. We observe them over a period of time, adding up their actions to come to a view of their leadership qualities.

John Cantwell, the former Major General, who rose through the Australian Army ranks, views leadership as being about emotional connections. He has observed this through his military career leading men and women in the very toughest situations. He led the Australian forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and rebuilt Victorian towns after the fires of Black Saturday.

In his second book 'Leadership in Action', Cantwell presents what he learnt about leadership during his 40-year career. He describes the skills and tools needed to build loyalty, teamwork, decisiveness and many other key elements to create true leadership.

A brief summary of his key points includes:

### **Leadership in Action. Top leadership rules from John Cantwell**

**1. Values determine your authenticity:** Here is where it all begins and possibly ends. We hear and use the words credibility; authenticity and values based leadership all the time. Cantwell states that as his career progressed he "discovered that personal integrity is a hard master to serve. Integrity is a lifelong commitment and a never-finished project." He observed that "people respond intuitively ...they see you as real; genuine; authentic."

**2. Being a truly accessible leader:** We have all heard of the open door policy, however a truly accessible leader travels regularly visiting their teams and talking to those at the frontline. Cantwell calls himself "a walk-and-talk junkie". He tried to spend time with his team learning about their everyday roles, as individuals and their family situations. He believes "These sessions were some of the most enjoyable ...and some of the most valuable."

**3. Big ideas can help leaders refocus and effect change:** We know of the corporate speak of big hairy audacious goals. Well, Cantwell works with big ideas to galvanise teams into huge actions. He states that his big idea in the wake of the Black Saturday fires in Victoria, “was to work with mining magnate Andrew Forrest to deliver portable huts as short-term accommodation while (his) team built temporary towns...” Cantwell aims to use the concept of big ideas often.

**4. Decisive leadership is not simply fast decision-making:** Cantwell makes the point that rapid decision-making is not decisiveness. The first is about speed; the second is about the quality. Decisive leadership requires a process to make the best possible decision still in a timely manner. He says, “It is the right people making the right decisions at the right time for the right reasons.”

**5. Storytelling can be an effective leadership tool:** Corporate storytelling has been trendy for a while. Cantwell is a big advocate. He uses stories as purposeful leadership tools to describe shared values or show the way to a new market reality or to pitch your big idea. He states, “it is far stronger than a vague vision statement”.

So here we have five of [ten top rules](#) for building an authentic, open, trusted, decisive leader who will bring their team with them on any journey of change or difficult mission. We know our political leaders have unfortunately been found wanting lately but it doesn't stop there.

All business leaders, particularly those in leading firms, and especially those that have a social licence to operate such as major financial services firms, must set an example of high quality leadership that all stakeholders benefit from. Global and local banks have not showered themselves in glory, but more on what can be done there at another time!

More than ever today we need leaders who are able to develop a shared vision and the skills to implement through others. These leaders will be needed to find solutions to the global malaise we find the world in. We could do a lot worse than working on our own skills as leaders and demanding more from society's leaders as Cantwell recommends. The title of his book 'Leadership in Action' gives us the biggest clue. Leadership only exists in action and can only be judged in the doing. The actions and outcomes of leading need to be reviewed and improved upon in a dynamic manner. The brave leader will continually seek constructive feedback, evaluate then adapt in readiness for the next challenge.

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