

# How to be a better leader

*Good leadership extends beyond the boardroom. Lani Carstens, Managing Director at John Brown Media Southern Africa, and part-time executive coach, shares her top tips for being a better leader - in life and at work.*

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In a world of rapid change and volatility, and increasing interconnectedness, the need to improve the way we work together has never been greater. Leaders also face the paradoxical challenge of having to deliver commercial results (and keep shareholders happy) whilst developing and mentoring people within a constantly changing business landscape.

## So, what makes a great leader?

Many books have been written on the subject, and there is tons of research, but what seems to be a common thread is that [EQ matters as much](#), if not more, than IQ. Good leaders are said to display the following traits: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills. All pretty self-explanatory, and likely easier said than done, especially in a pressured work environment.

I'm sure we've all had experience with different types of leaders, but the most fundamental lessons I've learnt are the importance of not only being true to yourself (and knowing what you stand for) but maintaining a strict coherence between what you feel and what you say or do. There should be an alignment between your own values, that of the organisation and how you "show up" in both. People are quick to detect when a leader's actions are in direct conflict with company values. (Just look at some politicians dominating the headlines to see examples of this playing out in real life.)

## A brain-based approach to collaborating with and influencing others

Being a great leader also means understanding what drives people, in order to collaborate more closely and improve performance and culture. There is a relatively simple model from a neuroscientific study (also known as SCARF) conducted in 2007 that simply states that our brains are hard-wired to move away from a perceived **threat** and move towards a **reward**. It essentially speaks to five domains of human behaviour, which I am sure will resonate with most of us:

**Status.** Knowing one's relative status in an organisation (or at home) and getting positive feedback and recognition for one's work is a very important driver of positive human behaviour. This is not only about the role we play at work but also our role within the greater community or at home. An example of a threat to one's status could mean promoting someone who is not ready (to a level of incompetence). Recognising and rewarding someone's performance, particularly in front of their peers, has a positive impact on one's status and standing within the organisation.

**Certainty.** People are wired to try to predict their future – and any change, however small, is perceived as a threat. This is

particularly tricky in business where rapid change seems to be the only constant! So how do we help to create some certainty in the face of flux? Leaders can help by setting clear objectives and goals, and by breaking complex situations down into smaller steps. Also, during times of change, communication is key. Letting people know when they can expect feedback, and making sure you give it to them, will help increase a sense of certainty.

**Autonomy.** This is the perception of having control over one's environment, and having choices. If you give someone a project to run, set clear parameters and let them get on with it, knowing they have your support, even if it means making mistakes (how else do we learn?). There is nothing worse than being given a task and then being micromanaged. Just. Don't. Do. It.

**Relatedness.** This involves the level to which you feel you are part of a greater whole. Be it your family, friends, organisation or community. People generally and naturally form "tribes" and knowing whether you are "in" or "out" socially is a key driver of how you behave. Higher levels of relatedness in an organisation lead to higher levels of trust – we generally trust people we have a good connection with. Ways to build relatedness at work can be through setting up opportunities to collaborate in small groups, coaching and mentoring sessions or social networking sessions. Never underestimate the importance of downtime and sharing a fun activity with your colleagues!

**Fairness.** The perception that we are not being treated fairly is one of the greatest hindrances to a healthy company culture. Having different sets of "rules" for different teams, or if company values are not being demonstrated by its leaders, can lead to a perception of unfairness. Leaders need to be as transparent as possible about company or business challenges, keep the lines of communication open, and set clear, measurable and achievable objectives.

Finally, a quote from one of the greatest leaders of our time: "A leader... is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, where upon others follow, not realising that all along the way they are being directed from behind." – Nelson Mandela

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