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Leaders of governments, sporting teams and business and other organisations around the world have had a torrid time of late. They have had to make tough calls, defend their decisions, and hold the line, in a climate in which they were likely to be judged harshly, irrespective of circumstance or need.

There are some signs of improvement, yet as Bob Dylan famously sang:

"... don't speak too soon for the wheel's still in spin. And there's no tellin' who that it's namin'.... For the times they are a-changin'."

It is no coincidence therefore that many influential thought leaders, consultants and bloggers have been defining and commenting on the personal attributes and leadership qualities seen as critical for these times. We have previously spoken of Resilience, and recent articles from Harvard Business Review, McKinsey, and others of their ilk speak of the need to rebuild trust, create a culture of candour, and lead in ways that inspire employees, customers and investors.

Predictability, Understanding, Control & Compassion are the four signposts to sustainability and success in times of great change and uncertainty, says Professor Robert I. Sutton in HBR.

Research shows that people in power tend to become more self-centred, and sadly, perhaps less self-aware. In focusing on their own wants and needs, they become less considerate of others, and less inclusive. At times of stress, they are likely to withdraw to concentrate on what seems important to them, while their subordinates watch them intently, trade information and gossip, and try to find ways of predicting their own futures.

Leaders who can plumb the depths of their own anxiety and uncertainty and find understanding and compassion are better able to communicate and control the flow of events, even if they can't actually prevent the events themselves. To be forewarned is to be forearmed, and when people know what is likely to happen, and when and how, they can prepare to some extent, and will be less anxious. Similarly, if they trust that there will be timely and honest communication throughout, they are less likely to spend time worrying about the imponderables.

Understanding is essential, if change is to be assimilated and integrated. The *why* and *how* of a major change initiative must be communicated simply and without ambiguity, and repeated time and time again in order to penetrate the fog that often accompanies strong emotions.

Fear produces a fight, flight or freeze reaction and people can become anxious, frustrated and angry when they feel powerless, or feel stymied and stuck when confronted with a challenge of overwhelming proportions. There are also those who will choose to act sooner, as opposed to react later, which means key people could leave. Leaders must break challenges into manageable components, engage people in collective problem-solving, and afford them a sense of ownership and agency.

Compassion and empathy require us to stand in someone else's shoes for a while, so as to know something of their experience. When delivering bad news, be aware that the shock, anxiety and distress you perhaps felt when you first made (or became aware of) the decision, are most likely the same feelings that the person sitting before you, is experiencing now. People need time to sort through their feelings, explore their options, and make choices for their future, and it is important to give them your support and understanding, so they can preserve a sense of dignity and self-worth.





A Traveller's Tale: How I lost my job and found another one

The Unmarked fork in the road: journey to the first milestone

It's 9.00 a.m. and for many, the day has just begun. For me, the world has just ended.

I arrived at work at 7.30, having fought the lethargy of another early morning following another late night and got through the school drop-offs without too much drama. I was sitting at my desk looking through my 'To Do' list when I realised my boss was standing beside me. He smiled and said good morning, then asked if I would join him in his office. That was it. That's all. No early warning signals, no drills, no alarm bells. Just a smile and a good morning, to mark the beginning of the end of the world.

I joined him in his office. A few minutes of inconsequential chatter and then "I'm really sorry Mark. You've done a fabulous job over the past 23 years but... *we're going to have to let you go!*" He said some other things but I didn't really hear any of them. I walked back to my desk and sat down. My 'To Do' list was still up on the screen. I looked at it, then at the folder in my hand. I wondered where I'd got it and remembered Dave saying he'd enrolled me in some sort of career advisory program and that I should go and see the lady in Meeting Room 2. There's a typhoon's worth of feelings swirling around in me so I just sit for a while and try to pin them down.. Shocked. Angry. Hurt. Ashamed. Afraid.

I pick myself up—I'm on autopilot, physically numb, sick in the stomach, trying to keep my emotions buttoned-down. I walk up the corridor, pretending I've got somewhere to go, something to do, wondering who else knows and what they are thinking, and what I'm going to say to my wife when I get home.

I knock and this lady opens the door for me. She smiles and although my feelings are unruly and unpredictable, somehow, that's okay. We're here. We showed up.

Eighty percent of success is showing up
[Woody Allen]