

The first in an occasional series of Fruitful Conversations to uncover how top leaders and communicators are successful in achieving what they set out to do.



In this first Fruitful Conversation, Helen Toogood, Vice President - New Ways of Working at Unilever IT has kindly agreed to reveal her innermost thoughts on how she uses engaging leadership to create new ways of working at Unilever IT.

When I heard Helen Toogood speak at a conference, I sat up and took notice. She was talking about embedding change in business teams at Unilever and yet here she was showing me a picture of the Queen.....

This may sound like astute attention grabbing for a dry subject but in fact it is more than that – the Queen was included because Helen thinks carefully about her audience. With the picture of the Queen, she was giving us a visually appealing and easy way into the fundamentals of her own leadership style. Through the picture her message was – ensure people know you as a brand, flag change up, keep some things comfortable and, of course, retain what's good – hang on to the organisation's crown jewels.

I asked Helen how she went about developing this talk and whether there is a pattern to her approach.

'Yes', she says, 'before I talk to a group I always ask myself some searching questions: 'Where is this audience on this right now? What are they thinking and feeling? Where would I like them to be?' I think about what that group of people may be experiencing and what I would like to have happen during and afterwards. I think about them and connecting with them before I plan anything I want to say.'

She views her structured approach as one of her best practices.

'It's all about finding a connection with people you talk to – I'm looking for what makes them interested first.' This mirrors her view of leadership – that it's getting alongside what makes other people fulfilled and playing to their strengths. 'Understanding people in the context of where you are going with them is of paramount importance.'

If there was one leadership skill she would least like to lose – it is this ability to connect with people.

Four years ago Helen started a sizeable change programme at Unilever, successfully inspiring teams of people at all levels (including a senior stakeholder group) to embrace the business opportunities IT can bring and using a team of ambassadors to create a passion for IT.

As part of this she had to persuade IT people that their best work was going to be done learning top notch relationship management in order to promote the value of IT.

And for that, she brought into play another of her best practices. This time from the hotel trade, where says Helen, 'I learned a lot about leadership in a very practical setting. I hated conflict and it's much easier to show people what you want by going out there and doing it. If you want the cushions plumped up in reception, spend some time plumping cushions. It tells people it's important'.

So how did you apply that to your Unilever teams?

'It meant that we had to show what good relationship skills look like, we had to demonstrate what it all means. I believe you have to be the change you want to see. So we rehearsed, practiced, mentored and held real meetings in front of people going onto our training programmes.'

It was the hotel business again that helped inform another aspect of Helen's leadership – the ability to find and put the best part of herself forward in difficult situations.

'It's like emerging from the tetchy chef in the kitchen and switching to smile at guests 'front of house' – I still use those swing doors to change my frame of mind. It allows me to give people my full attention.'

Not surprisingly – having worked in hospitality, Helen has a strong customer service ethos, but she also thinks it's just as important to treat other people, such as your colleagues, as if they were customers too.'

At key times, she uses these beliefs about people and her ability to focus on them empathically - to help her perform. She recounts one of her first meetings opening the business partnering programme at Unilever:

'I was nervous as I was asking people to do something – previously not considered to be part of their job. However, I drew strength from looking at my supportive colleagues and then switching my gaze to someone I knew might not be on board and wanting the best for them. For me, there was complete conviction that what we were doing was in everybody's best interests. I passionately believed that where we were going was good and I used this to help me draw out people who may have been resistant.'

'The feeling of strength (and wanting the best for them) helped me to want to air their concerns. People were in a different place – they had to question, to process and understand. What helped that meeting go well was bucket loads of empathy and knowing people were starting in a different place.'

Another of Helen's hallmarks is feeling strongly about things. She is not afraid to 'bring her personality to work'.

'I have a passion for what IT can do, for excellence and vitality delivered through people who enjoy life and work. I think I have stayed true to who I am and to my values and I think people see this.'

Interestingly, leadership research published in the Harvard Business Review' supports this, 'Inspirational leaders' it says, 'reveal their differences. They capitalize on what's unique about themselves.'

Helen says her view of leadership is always evolving, 'I'm at my best when I'm like the conductor of an orchestra – I know I can bring other people to the fore and I'm calmer and involving people'.

Running the change programme has continued to reshape her ideas of leadership: 'when introducing significant new ideas, I used to see them a little too much as my own; now I recognize that less emotional attachment is a better strategy. This allows me to seed an idea that will most likely encounter initial resistance but that other people will then want to evolve and make their own. That is now my definition of success.'

'As a result we have people in IT with top class relationship management skills who can feed IT-based ideas into the business – not just respond to the business'.

When Helen presented on this Unilever change programme at an outside meeting recently, many present spoke of the absolute congruence between Helen's desire that the change should be successful, her active working support to ensure that success and her continuous management of the senior stakeholder group.

Her best feedback, however, comes from a member of her department who sent her a card saying.... 'You've changed my life for the better'.

Helen's key leadership principles

- Connecting with people is all important
- Walk the talk
- Be the change you want to see
- Find a passionate purpose
- Step into other peoples' shoes and feelings before you bring in your own message
- Get detailed about your outcomes - be very aware of what you want to achieve with people

Helen's best practice for engaging a group

A – Audience: Primary, Secondary, Tertiary

Who are they? How do they feel about this topic? How are they feeling in general? What are their priorities/drivers at this time?

B - Behaviours

How do you want them to feel after the interaction? What do you want them to do? What behaviours do you need to see from them?

C – Content and Context

Developed as a result of AB. The message of your communication

D – Delivery

The best channel to this audience in this instance. The tone and emotion of the interaction. The optimum medium to deliver the message.

E – Evaluation

How are you going to measure how the message "landed"? How will you capture the evaluation?

F – Feedback

How you judge your own performance. How will you capture it?

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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References:

1. Goffee, R. & Jones, G. (Sept – Oct 2000) Why Should Anyone Be Led By You? Harvard Business Review