Leadership Lessons from Brexit

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Short bio

Peter Miller was an Associate Professor in management at the Southern Cross University Business School, Australia. He has more than thirty years experience working in senior management roles in the public sector, the mining industry and in higher education. His co-authored leadership books have been best sellers in Australasia for several years.

Leadership lessons from Brexit

Some weeks ago I had a conversation with one of my sons who lives in London about his thoughts on the then upcoming Brexit referendum. He told me he would be voting for the ‘remain’ group. I told him that my reading of the mood of voters was that Britain would ‘leave’ the European Union. He did not scoff at me - he is too polite and respectful for that. But he had a confidence in his voice. After all, the polls consistently showed his view to be right and not mine and as a senior finance elite, his colleagues all thought the same way. He holds an EU passport.

I endeavoured to explain to him some of the fundamental changes happening around the globe. It concerns people who are our leaders and those being led. While not yet generally appreciated, the phenomenon is equally applicable to leaders of organisations as it is to the political, cultural and financial leader elites. The changes are a natural response to address the huge sense of disconnection between leaders and those being led.

The led have lost confidence in their leaders and have clearly had enough of the dysfunctional leadership they observe everyday. Enough of false promises and lies from leaders, enough of meaningless slogans and platitudes, enough of self serving arrogance, enough of leaders with their snout in the taxpayer or organisational trough, enough of endless debate about share and currency prices and things that mean little to their everyday experience and lives, enough of greed and self indulgence, enough of endless spin, enough of bad policy, enough of global values that do not accord with their own values and enough of doing it tuff while the elite take annual salaries that are not reachable in a non elite lifetime and seen by them as just plain obscene.

The changes are being manifested in a community sense in the only peaceful way possible – through the ballot box - an electoral revolt by the non elites against the political, financial and cultural elite, whose complacent assumptions have been shown to be less and less relevant to non elites. The media are also seen by non elites as not to be trusted and part of the problem. Millions of ordinary people are full with resentment and are displaying it. Leaders have lost the support and trust of the general public.

The resentment of people in the workplace against workplace leaders manifests as 'disengaged' employees and high turnover rates.
And as the non elites come to the realisation that enough is enough, they also have realised that their vote has exactly the same worth as an elite's vote and, in a democracy, that gives the non-elite group power as by definition, non-elites will always out number elites.

The elites make the assumption that they are the natural leaders entitled to lead. They also assume the non elites will follow or elect only the established political class, that is usually seen as conservatives or labour, and have not yet appreciated that the rise of minorities, mavericks and independents is a sign of the end of the dominance of the political classes.

How can I be sure of this? The reaction from the elites when things don't go as they have planned is the evidence. While the elites like to often use the mantra of democracy, they cry like school children when the exercise of democratic process does not go to their plan or their way. Such arrogance only confirms the non elite belief that the elites are out of touch and not fit for leadership. The cries and tantrums of the elites that the non elites do not know what they are doing only emboldens the non elites to demonstrate their electoral power again and again, and to stick it up the elites the next opportunity they get. Desperate cries from the minority sore loser elites demonstrates their arrogance and another paradox. Elites enjoy the freedoms of a democracy but are unable to accept democratic outcomes when it's not the outcome they planned! Perhaps elites need to be reminded that it's them that are subject to majority rule and by their sore loser tantrums and actions, they are betraying the democratic system they purport to support.

The resentment of the non elites has been building up for a decade and the fact that the elites and media did not see it coming, also reinforces the doubts about the elites competence and authority to lead.

Don't believe this change is happening? Ask former Australian and Queensland Premier Campbell Newman about his recent election loss, an un-losable election in any other time in Australian history. Examine the Brexit vote and the subsequent tantrums (particularly from young professional elites to be), look at the rise of mavericks like Donald Trump, look at hung or finely balanced parliaments around the globe as majority non elites struggle to find someone decent from the political classes to vote for.

The elites can expect more and more that the non elites will defy the elites political parties tradition messages, spin and warnings about 'wasting' their vote on independents or new parties. Workplace leaders can expect more and more that influence based on positional authority will mean less and less.

So what can genuine leaders do to deal with the fundamental changes happening?

First and foremost is to start listening to the needs of non elites rather than talking at them. Until non elite values (like fairness, respect and transparency) and their opinions are acknowledged and respected, the gulf between the elites and non elites will only widen.
Second, leaders need to articulate a vision for the country or organisation that is being led that is inclusive of non elites and relevant to them. They should talk more often about what interests’ non elites, not equity markets, currency valuations and matters mostly seen by non elites as irrelevant to their daily lives.

Leaders need to be accountable when mistakes are made. Leader elites are not, as they appear to believe, masters of the universe as the 2008 GFC showed.

Leader elites need to show humility to those who put them in the position they are in and receive remuneration more consistent with the actual rather than perceived contribution elites make to the country or organisation and with relativity to the remuneration of non elites.

Leaders need to act graciously when the majority non elites exercise their franchise, accept majority rule rather than throw tantrums and dummy spit when outcomes do not match their expectations.