



The Tough Calls of Leadership

I was interested to hear on the radio recently about one school's approach to encouraging children to eat healthy school dinners. The school's head chef explained how they had involved the children in the development of the menus and taken great care to understand what they wanted and to educate them in the need to eat healthily. The presenter of the programme retorted: 'Why do you ask them what they want? Shouldn't they just eat what's put in front of them, like we used to?' To which the head chef replied, 'At this school we involve our children and their families in every decision we make, it's the right way to do things.'

Hard to disagree with that isn't it?

I also listened recently to the managing director of a local housing company. He wasn't talking about school dinners at all. His speech was about leadership. Leadership to him is one of the two keys to business success – the other being quality service. Leadership, he said, came down to two key elements – strategy and character. And if you could only have one of those, then choose character.

I would be the last person to argue that businesses should not constantly seek to engage with and consult with their employees or that public sector organisations shouldn't listen carefully to communities or in the case of school meals, children and families. But I do wonder whether sometimes the cult of consultation doesn't get in the way of – or indeed in some cases is an abnegation of - effective leadership.

Just as the school's head chef makes every effort to engage with the school's children and their families, so I am sure most readers of Eastern Directors will receive countless invitations to consultation events, designed to get their views on the latest economic strategy for the area (I know this for a fact, as I arrange some of them, myself!), proposed new housing development or new business support service. Again, it is hard to disagree with the principle of seeking to engage and listen to the views of local business leaders in developing such plans. Stripping out the jargon, such consultation is in effect customer research – and is therefore a vital component of the second key to business success, as quoted earlier – quality service.

My concern about the current emphasis on consultation is not therefore one of principle. As the head chef said, 'it is the right way to do things': but rather of practice. What makes consultation meaningless is when it is used as an excuse for putting off decisions – in other words for avoiding the tough calls of leadership. Business leaders need to make sure that when they are consulting their staff or their communities that they are doing so for the right reasons – to keep people informed or

to offer a genuine opportunity to shape decisions. But once we have that information then it is up to leaders to act and act decisively.

And in that sense to show not only that they have the right strategy, but that they have the right character too.

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