

Dogs at war; finding trust!

by Caroline Evans

I'm sure I read somewhere that "women and old men don't start wars". Now, I may be wrong but even so it's an interesting provocation. I don't want to focus on the gender or ageism biases but rather the idea that if you are responsible for delivering the next generation or have seen the results of military conflict you may well be less convinced of its success. I'm old enough to know that what seems black and white when we are young, gradually turns grey. But how do you convey this, especially when, armed with the lens of hindsight, history tends to label greyness as weakness?

If there was ever a time in my life to feel 'grey', it's now. When Covid-19 initially impacted and for the first few weeks of lockdown, I'd say most of us fell into one camp or the other in our opinion on how to deal with the crisis: those who advocated short sharp action to protect the most vulnerable, followed by herd immunity for economic recovery or those who would rather prioritise health across the board by doing whatever it takes for as long as it takes by way of restrictions on our daily life.

However, who now feels less certain of the right answer? I certainly do! Is there a middle way or just a muddle way? It's not only the Prime Minister and the UK Government, but also many business leaders who must be conflicted by their own personal experiences and awareness of the circumstances of others. Nonetheless, they have to make or at least comply with decisions made 'for the common good'. One day, the exact science of hindsight will tell us what actions should have been taken but until then indecision, confusion and even a sense of insincerity will continue to reign.

A key conundrum for all leaders is how they can stick to their guns and follow a plan whilst remaining receptive, showing agility and communicating effectively. When should leaders be resilient in relentlessly pursuing a chosen path, and when should they acknowledge and rectify mistakes by re-calibrating that decision? Or change direction entirely?

It occurred to me that sometimes the rules don't matter; what matters is the message, and recently this was brought home to me by a walk in the park with one of my dogs, Joe.

I've mentioned Joe before; he's a big black noisy dog, who looks and sounds brave but is actually very scared of everything. In his head he has a choice, pre-emptive offensive action or run and hide. He generally chooses the former and mostly the rules of home counties' dog walking say he's in the wrong, so I apologise on his behalf. However, the other day, he was definitely not to blame for a dog-on-dog altercation, but I nonetheless apologised – why? Because if I'd pointed the rights and wrong of the situation the transgressor's owner would have learnt nothing about Joe's issues. They would probably have paid no attention to my admonishments of their badly behaved dog, on the basis that what could I possibly know about dogs when I owned one that behaved like Joe.

By acknowledging the flaw in my dog, the other dog's owner would, I hope, realise that better controlling her dog would protect it and others, and their owners – not to mention save on vets bills and unnecessary stress all round! (I should point out that no injuries were incurred during the incident I've mentioned).

The problem with all of this is that people just 'see what they see', however, there is always a backstory. Joe certainly had his backstory that led us to know how he would behave and how we could help him and others understand his behaviour but there's no time to explain this when he's in action. We have to give clear and concise information that is constructive and purposeful in a fast-moving situation and hope that our audience – of dogs, owners and passers-by – listen and trust us enough to believe we are doing the right thing.

And the same is so true of businesses, especially at the moment. There is so much backstory that it's even more imperative than ever that all stakeholders receive clear and concise messages that inform and support – and that they trust. The key challenge is to get as many people on the same wavelength but allow for manoeuvrability as circumstances will inevitably change. Personalities, life experiences, domestic situations and working practices differ so much, yet it is critical every decision is considered from all angles and points of view – and in real time – in order to coordinate and communicate a way forward that satisfies the majority.

To succeed today, our leaders need to ensure that all behind-the-scene discussions, disputes and analyses are concluded and consistent messaging is agreed before going public. In the face of this crisis our leaders should be using every available communication channel to collaborate across industries, governments and the world in a more unified fashion than ever before. Do we have the capacity to 'think straight' and be bold, consistent and inclusive in our messaging? If so, might the general din dissipate and the respectful learning begin? After all, we are all relying on leaders just as much as Joe relies on me to protect him and literally 'talk him out of trouble'!

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