

## **Learn lessons on leadership and trust from an unexpected source**

A few years ago I learned some important lessons regarding leadership and teamwork. But I gained these insights not from the world of business but from somewhere quite different - a few years sojourn on the amateur stage. Having joined a local theatre group and no doubt fancying myself as a future Olivier, I enrolled in an acting class. The early classes did not, thankfully, major on how to act as a fried egg. Rather, our instructor focused on something much more interesting and, for me, unexpected: how to take responsibility on stage, and the need to develop extreme levels of trust in fellow actors.

An early exercise in the former was something very simple. We budding thespians milled around a central stage area and a large ball was lobbed in by our instructor. The one picking it up was now responsible for what happened next. Some just held onto the ball; some bounced it; some played football with it. When he or she decided to get rid of the ball, it had to be thrown with purpose to another actor with the cry: "It's yours" - the "it" being not just the ball, but the responsibility of what to do with it.

In my first stage role I quickly appreciated the value of this seemingly trivial exercise. When the line is delivered, the "ball" is essentially thrown and the responsibility for what happens next is passed to someone else. And if the line does not come back on time, or with different words from what is expected, the actor feels uncertain. In that moment the other actor is, in fact, responsible for my comfort level on stage. Leadership on stage is being passed around, moment by moment, line by line.

Another, more dramatic, exercise was designed to show the critical role that trust plays between actors. Students were paired up, and each took it in turns to be blindfolded. One student now had the responsibility to lead his blind partner - using only verbal directions and without any physical contact - out of the theatre space, down stairs, outside the theatre building and across a busy street. The blindfolded student's comfort and even physical safety was entirely in the hands of this relative stranger. This was indeed a forceful test of a willingness to trust.

So what can business people learn from these exercises? A lot, I think. Responsibility for a task - leadership if you will - is something that often must be shared and passed around. But leadership can't be forced - it has to be accepted, willingly, when the business ball is passed.

Trust is the essence of team work. If I trust you, I trust that you will do your part to ensure that I and the group of which we are a part can succeed. You will trust me to do the same. When we trust at this level, much bureaucracy that is often spent ensuring that individuals are doing what they are supposed to be doing is swept away.

It's easy to assume that the worlds of theatre and the arts have no relevance for business. I learned all those years ago that the world of commerce can gain much from observing professionals in other disciplines at work.

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