'AQ' emerging as key leadership trait

17 February 2021 3:58pm

The pandemic saw leaders rely heavily on EQ and emotional leadership practices, but navigating out of the crisis will require 'AQ', an executive coach and author says.

Where emotional intelligence dictated organisations' response to the pandemic, it is leaders' "adaptability quotient", that will be critical in adjusting to the new normal of a post-pandemic working environment, says **Caroline Kennedy**, in her latest book, Lead Beyond 2030.

AQ and a leader's capacity to cope with change and uncertainty is "likely to be a prime reason for [employers'] selection of future employees and leaders", she predicts.

"Businesses that can't or don't adapt will fail. Think of Kodak or BlackBerry; their low AQ meant they couldn't recognise or respond to changes in technology or demand.

"Not only do these failed giants have quite a lot in common, but their stories merge into a single powerful parallel about the dangers of success and the consequent failure to adapt, innovate, and ultimately remain relevant."

According to Kennedy, leaders can self-assess their adaptability by testing personal habits against criteria such as how open they are to new suggestions, how they react to unexpected outcomes, how confident they are in idea generation, and how well they manage emotions in order to stay focused and on-task.

Further, she refers to the four keys to adaptability as **seeing** a problem, **taking ownership** of a problem, **finding solutions** to a problem, and using said solutions to **correct** a problem.

Leaders with a high AQ also have a strong sense of innovation, and draw on this skill to the benefit of the organisation, she says.

Operationalise innovation for adaptability

Leaders with a strong AQ turn innovation into a strategy, rather than simply encouraging innovative practices, Kennedy says.

"An innovative and adaptable business doesn't turn to innovation only when a problem arises," she says.

"It encourages innovative thinking from the ground up. It should be part of your business model."

When designing an organisation's innovation strategy, successful leaders take a similar approach to the task as they would to a marketing strategy, maintaining an awareness of social expectations and customer needs, she adds.

"Get out from behind the desk. Observe your customer. Identify any patterns that might provide insights into their needs. Innovation springs from observation and patterns.

"A prime example here is the headrest on planes. This idea came from a flight attendant who had watched passengers' heads drop every time they slept in flight and submitted the suggestion as a result."

Further, asking questions such as, "how have our customers' problems changed?", and, "what do we want to achieve?", gives a natural flow to designing a strategy while also relying on innovation to start the process.

"As an innovative business leader, you must develop a framework for your innovation processes to ensure they remain aligned with your business purpose and needs," says Kennedy.

"Build your strategy around your people and you'll reap the rewards with increased productivity, higher efficiency, higher employee engagement, and much more workplace satisfaction."

Separating creativity from innovation

While innovation is often a side-effect of creativity, creating separation between the two makes producing and implementing innovative strategies less daunting, says Kennedy.

"I think it's important to distinguish between the two terms because many of us are uncomfortable with the concept of creativity and we worry that we don't have what it takes to be creative," she says.

"Creativity is a freedom of mind and imagination... it [is] certainly not something exclusively for the artsy crowd.

"Innovation is about taking these new ideas and solutions and making them tangible, making them happen. It's about implementation."

Further, innovation is "more measurable than creativity", and therefore can achieve visible results.

However, "without creativity, there will be nothing new to implement", and the visibility of innovation may lead to managers pushing for innovative environments without allowing for a space where "creativity can flourish".

To counteract this effect, Kennedy says "creativity and innovation need to come from the top".

"Executive leadership reverses that process, creating an atmosphere which encourages people to create and share new ideas," she says.

"Even if you don't consider yourself particularly creative, you can increase your level of creativity and you can nurture it in others."

Could more people on your team benefit from receiving HR Daily Premium access and membership? Contact Pauly *for our discounted rates to add colleagues to your HR Daily Premium account.*

Related premium content

- Webcast: Emotional intelligence and the road to recovery
- "Safe spaces" foster feedback that drives innovation
- Five "blockers" are holding back workplace creativity
- Case study: Constructive leaders 'make the difference' in pandemic adaptability
- Transformational leaders key to development success
- "Bandaid solutions" holding back HR innovation

Related content

- Leading in uncertainty is top learning priority for 2021
- True leadership is intuitive, not reactive
- Four guiding principles for agile HR
- Two very different approaches to workplace innovation