

When Real Leadership is Mistaken for a Midlife Crisis

Kate had been feeling out of sorts for a while. Performing well as a GM for a large NZ corporate, she was well liked by her colleagues and her organisation wanted to hang on to her. Her family and friends thought she was very successful but Kate felt unsettled.

Her work no longer excited her.

Even though work was frantically busy, it was becoming very predictable. Kate started feeling regular Monday morning resentment and she didn't like the way it felt. She wondered if she was having a midlife crisis and she joked about what to do when she 'grew up'.

Mike found himself getting grumpier with his kids, co-workers and even the cat. Frustrated with his CEO and his colleagues, Mike felt they were small minded and focused on things that didn't really matter. He questioned if all the work he was putting in was worth it. He wondered whether he was wasting his potential. He felt he could do and be much more. In quiet moments Mike wondered if a midlife crisis was hitting.

A midlife crisis is the classic explanation for feelings of frustration, irritability and futility, especially for high performers mid career, in their 40's or 50's.

But this explanation is inadequate and somewhat insulting for people who have always succeeded and aspired to make a difference.

This article offers another interpretation of the midlife crisis, where uncomfortable feelings are seen as part of the development of greater leadership capacity.

The Leadership Leap

Senior executives have long abandoned the myth of the leader as the all-knowing heroic figure. But elements of this white knight expectation still surface at work. Being able to provide clever answers and make strong decisions looks and feels good!

But leadership involves a lot more than fixing problems and driving for short-term performance. Genuine leadership challenges are a complicated tangle of competing agendas that have no quick fix. Exceptional leadership is really about facilitating entirely new possibilities out of these gnarly challenges.

Piloting from known and certain territory into the unknown is no simple task. It is much more than just moving from doing one thing to another. It involves a fundamental shift in perspective. It rocks current assumptions and brings everything into question.

The practice of leading in this territory is not glamorous. It brings with it feelings that might look surprisingly like a mid-life crisis – doubt, confusion, and hopelessness. But rather than run from these feelings, courageous executives pay attention and understand that this is part of leadership work.

Leadership: It Often Begins With Doubt

Almost always the leadership process begins with a niggling unsettledness, where things don't seem to be working so well anymore. Often building up over years, the tried and trusted ways of doing things are stalling. Although a leader would like to be fueled with utter clarity and strong focus, more than likely they will experience times of being shrouded in doubt and confusion as to what to do next.

Menacing questions begin to hover, like "is this all there is?" and "what is the point?"

Very often leaders face a personal valley at the same time that their industry is failing and dogged with persistent crisis.

In the cut and thrust workplace these “meaning of life” orientated observations are openly ridiculed. In a culture that values decisiveness, questioning too deeply is not encouraged. For a start, it takes too long!

Few have the opportunity to reflect seriously and to experience the emotions of bewilderment and disorientation. It is uncomfortable to be unsure. To become unhooked from the current game is frightening especially if it undermines core confidence. Escape routes and distractions seem preferable to wallowing in such a murky place.

Avoiding and deny these feelings is natural. It is not often recognised that these “valley” characteristics of real change are a vital part of the leadership process. Rather than being a sign of incompetence and failure, tough emotions mark the passage into the new frontier.

Getting comfortable when there is no solid ground to stand on is the leap required.

Leadership Survival

Rather than drowning in a sense of failure and disillusionment, real leaders are galvanised. This requires a huge leap in capacity. Inside an uncertain and challenging context, true leaders begin to blossom.

Dealing with the leadership challenges of an organisation and an entire industry starts with leading the self through personal and professional doubts. Some deceptively simple principles and practices can guide this:

Know You Are Not Alone

Hundreds of other very successful people will be having very similar thoughts and feelings. Even if people are unwilling to admit it, this experience is common, shared widely by everyone at certain times of their careers.

Take Time For Yourself

The natural inclination for successful people who are faced with big challenges is try to move faster and make things happen. It might feel counter intuitive, but slowing down and taking time to reflect is essential.

Although it can feel uncomfortable to explore difficult

circumstances, sifting through thoughts and feelings is the key to moving into a more creative and confident place.

Create Simple Routines

When all that is familiar is not working or dropping away it can help to have a few predictable routines in place. This can reduce the feelings of turmoil and bring some order to the day. A regular visit to the gym, a walk at the same time every day, or even watching episodes of a favourite tv programme can bring some certainty.

Mindless and relaxed activities that don't involve substances are useful!

Begin Scribbling

The idea of a journal is a bit grandiose. But having a notebook for scribbling down thoughts can be clarifying. There is no need to censor these notes; they are not for anyone else. Just scribble honestly and see what you end up writing. Scribble down things lurking in the back of your mind. What is beckoning?

Take The Next Best Step

From making reflection time and scribbling down random thoughts, a small next step might emerge. It is a myth to think that everything has to be completely formed before the next step can be taken.

Thinking strategically means focusing on the longer-term vision or picture of success, without knowing all the steps of getting there. One next step can begin to create momentum and more insight. As the next steps are taken, slowly but surely a new future begins to make itself known.

Different options will open up and new avenues will emerge. The biggest advice that good leaders offer to others in the grasp of big change is to trust the process and have faith.

Having faith in the face of no certainty or no clues about what to do next is an act of leadership courage. Finding truly new possibilities is only possible if leaders go where they have never been before.

Otherwise the same old situation and same old tired solutions will be enough to give anyone a midlife crisis!



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Loretta has been instrumental in developing the coaching and mentoring profession in New Zealand, advocating ethical and professional practice. As founder of the New Zealand Coaching and Mentoring Centre, she is passionate about high quality development of leaders, as well as the professional supervision of coaches, mentors and consultants.

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