

Leading change is a challenge for Britain's party leaders

The UK political season has begun. Each year the key activists in the three main political parties gather to applaud the rhetoric of their leaders. This year has special relevance because it is the last party conference season before a general election. Each party leader has an opportunity to set out how they will change the country if elected.

The Liberal Democrats kicked things off last week with a speech from Nick Clegg mentioning the idea that he wanted to be prime minister twice, asking us to imagine a Lib Dem cabinet, and repeating the word “change” 38 times in 47 minutes. It was a performance that seemed to provide evidence that Mr Clegg had indeed taken hallucinatory drugs in his youth.

The Labour party will defend its 12 year governmental record in Brighton this week, followed by the Conservatives attempt to portray themselves as a government-in-waiting in Manchester the week after.

Which of the leaders has what it takes to lead Britain through the inevitable changes required to deal with massive debt and national decline?

A thought provoking new analysis of the three major party leaders produced exclusively for *Leading View* by Transcend, a UK based change leadership consultancy, shows the flaws each leader must overcome in order to successfully lead change.

Transcend's methodology was outlined in the 2008 book, *Sustaining Change: Leadership That Works*, in which Transcend's CEO Deborah Rowland and chairman Malcolm Higgs set out to identify the leadership behaviours that lead to successful change in the business world.

Companies that have made use of the ideas include Royal Dutch Shell and EDF Energy. Even the Church of England, once seen as the “Conservative party at prayer”, is building Transcend's approach into its coaching and development programme for bishops.

Rowland and Higgs identified four behaviours that are needed to ensure transformational change is effective: the ability of leaders to attract people towards a shared organisational purpose; creating opportunities for change to manifest itself in the ‘here and now’ moment; providing “tension” by naming and confronting tough issues; and by setting boundaries and expectations to channel energy in the direction of change. Only the top fifth percentile of world class leaders they studied demonstrated all four behaviours.

In the business world, leaders' successes are assessed through a method called "behavioural event interviewing" that probes for specific examples of behaviours that related to the major changes required by the organization.

With politicians, this type of interviewing is impractical. First, they would be unlikely to submit to the questioning. Second, evidence of their success is longer-term by nature. Who can say whether Gordon Brown's Afghanistan strategy is a success or a failure at this particular point in time?

Instead, Michael Thorley of Transcend analysed the change leadership abilities of the three British party leaders by assessing substantive speeches that outlined policy proposals, or reviewed progress against existing objectives. For each party leader a selection of three to five recent speeches was reviewed against Transcend's four successful behaviours.

How did the party leaders do? One area where they all performed poorly was on considering how the speech they were giving was itself an opportunity to motivate the audience to help with the change required. According to Mr Thorley, both Chancellor Merkel and President Obama demonstrate this ability, but it is rarely manifested by the British party leaders.

As one might expect, the analysis of Gordon Brown reveals a strange inability to use his natural authority as prime minister and party leader to confront tough issues or attract people towards a shared purpose. He is good at setting rules and boundaries, but that is all he does. There is very little balance in his approach. Mr Thorley observed, "He is a backseat control freak."

Transcend's research predicts that unless Gordon Brown changes his approach and begins to connect with people at a personal level, he will not be a successful leader. Compared to both David Cameron and Nick Clegg, Mr Brown's speeches reveal a man who Ms Rowland describes as "too personally egotistical. He can't reinvent himself, or show vulnerability, or take ownership."

David Cameron, on the other hand comes across as an amalgam of sibilant adjectives: slow, steady, stable and secure. Unlike Mr Brown, his speeches are very personal and attempt to connect with his audience. He often talks about people he has met and how he can transform their lives. By contrast, Mr Brown's speeches are mostly about the mechanics of a situation or policy.

However, the challenge for Mr Cameron is a seeming inability to identify what change consultants often refer to as “a burning platform” to create excitement and energy needed for substantive change. No wonder he replaced the Conservatives’ traditional symbol of a flaming torch with that of a stiff but solid tree.

Given the party’s approach to reining in public spending this could be a serious flaw. Mr Thorley believes Mr Cameron is “trying too hard to be OK”. While Mr Cameron’s speeches are in Ms Rowland’s view, “not interesting, but relevant,” Nick Clegg’s orations are “interesting, but not relevant.” Of course, the same might be said for their prospective parties’ policies.

Given the economic situation in which the UK finds itself, and the weakness of the political system to galvanize popular support for change, how the party leaders perform is critical. If the party leaders are serious about transforming Britain, they – like many business leaders before them – will need to rethink their personal approach to leading change.

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