
LEADING TRENDS

Bridges or Barriers?



NOTE: This January 2023 Leading Trends once again contains the annual New Year's missive from Jim Laing, a leadership consultant and colleague of ours in the United Kingdom. Jim's brief bio follows the text. We enjoy his message every year and think our readers will find this one especially helpful. Included here with permission.

When H.M. Queen Elizabeth II opened it in 1981, the **Humber Bridge** was (until 1998) the longest single-span suspension bridge in the world. It is still the only bridge of its type that you

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can walk or cycle across. We live only about 25 minutes away from the Humber, so we planned to walk across it on this New Year's Day with our elderly dog, Lara. Great idea and we made a good start, but the very high wind, rain, and dog-scaring road noise forced us back, sadly, to the safety of the northern shore after only getting to the first tower. Never mind, another day, perhaps. Being the first day of 2023, it did, as often happens, get me thinking about leadership. Some leaders I

“Much happens in a classroom with solid teaching that is not quantified. The curriculum itself might be explicit on paper, but all the interactions, the expectations around class culture, how children are supported as they struggle to understand a concept or to control their drifting attention or to learn a new language skill that is challenging—those also have a framework to them that might not be obvious on a curriculum map.”

have known used bridge building as part of their leadership repertoire, whilst others seemed more intent on setting up barriers.

Leading and managing others is rarely easy, and I suspect that 2022 might not have gone entirely according to plan for many friends and former colleagues in leadership roles. The whole world is in a bit of a mess, especially regarding climate change. There's also a dreadful war in mainland Europe, and the U.K. is stricken with strikes, a crumbling N.H.S., escalating energy costs, inflation, and a cost of living crisis. Some of these events may seem remote at times, but my experience in leadership tells me that big things rumbling away in the background can have a detrimental effect on the morale of many staff whom leaders are trying to motivate, encourage, and support in their teams and organisations.

Suppose you stop for a moment to reflect on many of the difficult things we are facing at the moment. In that case, they often have a common thread of discord, whether in politics, religion, public service sectors, culture, or business. That thread is best described as the D.D.D.C. continuum: A Disagreement... leads to Disparity... creating a Dispute... which can escalate to Conflict

I think it was Churchill who once said, “Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” I often ask myself why so many of our powerful politicians and other leaders seem so poor at preventing or resolving conflict when it is easy to analyse past mistakes. A full-scale war is, of course, much more difficult to deal with than an argument you might be trying to settle between members of your own team, but anyone can and should learn some of the **basic dispute resolution techniques**.

Many of you know that I spent part of my professional life as a qualified mediator helping leaders to settle disputes that often had substantial adverse effects across a whole organisation. I learnt (often the hard way!) that some leaders lack appropriate skills to resolve conflicts and that many find compromise a difficult position for

which to aim. A large and quite scary Dutch lawyer emphasised this point once by grabbing a felt pen during a mediation course I was facilitating. He crossed out the possible dispute outcome of “WIN/WIN” which I had written. He then said, “Get real,” and continued by writing “OK/OK” on the flip chart and adding, “That’s the best deal you should expect!” He was right!

So, my first suggestion for leaders in 2023 is to take a fresh look at any current or potential conflict situations and see if a good, old-fashioned compromise might be the answer. OK/OK is OK!

Linked to compromise, my other suggestion is that whenever you have a difficult decision to make this year, ask yourself a simple question before you speak to someone or send the email or tweet: “Am I building a bridge or a barrier?”

Bridges, of course, are usually better but first a few words of caution.

Some leaders say, “I get on well with everybody and never have any disputes; I’m good at compromising and I’m always building bridges; I never build barriers!” Unfortunately, a few leaders I have met are so driven by the need for affiliation that they are easily walked over or ignored by their own team members. They are often quite popular but not necessarily effective. They, and/or their organisation, can be taken for granted and not treated with respect. These leaders should look at the picture again because apart from the stunning splendour of the bridge there is the less obvious, but very important, watertight toughened glass flood prevention barrier in the foreground, designed to protect the houses on the other side of the road. Barriers are needed sometimes to stop attacks and perhaps abuse.

Effective leaders, however, know the benefits of building and using bridges between people rather than erecting unnecessary (sometimes unintentional) walls and barriers. Groups working together, cooperation between departments, and excellent client and customer relations, are just a few examples of where bridge building can benefit your organisation. Likewise, for you personally, it’s better to build respectful relationships than antagonistic enemies. Networking is all about bridge building. Wise leaders also know when to occasionally erect a ‘safety’ barrier to protect themselves and/or their team. The trick is to recognise when you need a bridge or when you might sometimes require a barrier.

Finally, it is worth noting that successful bridge building can take a long time. The first proposals for the Humber Bridge were made in the 1930s, and work did not begin until 1972, so be prepared not to see the immediate benefits of your bridge building. Be patient; build bridges if you can. It’s nearly always worth it!

Jim is a former headteacher and later the chief education adviser for a large local authority in the UK. He set up Ridgeway Associates more than twenty years ago and as a leadership coach, mentor, trainer and mediator he has supported the development of leadership and learning in schools all over the world. He has also worked with the leadership teams of several commercial organisations and national charities. Now retired he spends time writing about leadership including an annual leadership message every New Year

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