

# Inside Leadership

## Ambition is the key driver of sustained high performance.

Brian MacNiece and James Bowen of Kotinos Partners say many leaders have found themselves stuck on the backfoot, in “survival mode”.

One of the first casualties of recession is ambition. As the downturn began to bite, the focus in many organisations turned inwards and backwards. Leaders found themselves on the back foot, stuck in survival mode and shrinking their organisations by cutting cost, investment and heads.

While for many the new institutional priorities became identifying someone else to blame, by contrast it is clear that the recession brought with it significant opportunities. Many organisations have taken advantage of these to deliver great outcomes for themselves and their stakeholders in the short-term and to establish platforms for sustained high performance over time.

Amongst the more public examples in business are Apple, Tesco and Ryanair. Several other examples were on public display recently as finalists in the E&Y Entrepreneur of the Year awards. In other fields we see the sports of GAA and Rugby Union in Ireland, both of which are gaining significant participation and share of mind.

We believe that the key leadership and strategic attribute that separates winners from the also-rans, is ambition. Ambition as a vital starting point for sustained high performance. Organisations need to have it and must be able to articulate what it is. When we start to work with an organisation, regardless of whether these are businesses, sporting bodies

or public sector agencies, it is the first area we scrutinise. From our experience, we identify five core characteristics of “good” ambitions:

**Good Ambitions are Unreasonable – they challenge the paradigm.**

It is important to set the bar for ambition at a level that seems, at current course and speed, to be out of reach. This creates positive dissatisfaction with the status quo, challenging individuals and teams to deconstruct “good enough” approaches and build new ones that are fundamentally better.

Unreasonable ambitions are used all the time in sport by athletes and teams to push for breakthrough



performance. Golfer Pádraig Harrington is a good example, having set new goals on winning three major championships, he undertook a major overhaul of his technique, to drive for better and more consistent results.

**Good Ambitions are Captivating – they engage and energise the whole organisation.**

Good ambitions appeal to the emotions as well as the intellect. They capture the imagination and provide real meaning for individuals in organisations, inspiring them to give their best. What it is that captivates varies from one situation to the next. Pharmaceutical companies – Genzyme or Abbott for example – often incorporate patient outcomes into their ambitions, as the idea of improving lives is compelling for their workforces at all levels. In our work with multinational subsidiaries we look to define ambitions that, while reflecting the desired corporate outcomes, motivate improved relative performance and influence of the local site. This local “flavouring” of corporate ambitions is a powerful mobiliser of the local workforce.

**Good Ambitions are Connected – they reflect the organisation’s core purpose.**

All institutions have a core purpose. Businesses have as their’s the creation of value for shareholders, while many public bodies – from hospitals, to schools to leisure authorities to government – exist to provide high-quality, cost effective services for

communities. Governing bodies in sport have as their core purpose driving increased participation in and success of their sports at different levels. It is important, in setting ambition, for leaders to connect that ambition to the organisation’s fundamental purpose. Sometimes this linkage is easy to establish, however more often – in business and public service in particular – achieving real alignment (in essence of stakeholder and shareholder value) represents a significant challenge.

**Good Ambitions are Two-sided – they are constrained to reflect risk.**

It is argued that unfettered ambition has been at the heart of the financial services crisis. We would suggest that a key issue was insufficient implicit or explicit accounting for risk. President John F Kennedy in 1961 delivered one of the best practical examples of ambition-setting when he challenged the American people to put a man on the moon before the end of that decade and bring him back alive. As the story of Apollo 13 bears out, this overt acknowledgement of risk, when it came to the crunch, enabled Mission Control to prioritise bringing the astronauts home over having them walk on the moon.

**“Good” Ambitions are Non-directive – they capture the destination, without prescribing the journey.**

One of the core reasons for setting ambition is to provoke creativity and “game-changing” behaviour. In instances where, in addition to the

destination being defined so also is the means of arriving at that destination, we find that the scope for new ideas, paradigms, and behaviours is reduced. There are always constraints on how the journey might be undertaken – either self-imposed as covered above, or else imposed by the law, by regulators or, in sport, by the rules of the game.

However to the extent possible, ambitions should be framed such as to leave the widest possible scope for individuals and organisations to innovate and even more importantly, adapt their approaches to deal with changing circumstances over time. In the current environment where ambition has in many instances, been “beaten out” of leaders and their teams, we find that reopening the question “what do you want to achieve?” is an effective means of provoking a progressive, optimistic conversation focused on opportunities rather than problems.

**This in turn leads to new initiatives, action, energy and ultimately to high performance.**

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