

Paul Sloane

We need leaders who can admit that they were wrong



For large companies to innovate they often have to face the fact that their current products and business model need to change. Think of Kodak, Nokia and Blockbuster Video. What's more when they try something new, very often the innovation does not work. The organisation has to learn fast and adapt. First however, the leader has to admit that they were wrong. For proud, successful senior people this is very hard.

Mark Lynas is an environmental activist who was one of the leading opponents of genetically modified foods. He argued that the selfish greed of big corporations would threaten the health of both people and the Earth. In 2013 he dramatically changed his mind. He said, 'I apologise for having spent several years ripping up GM crops. I am also sorry that I helped to start the anti-GM movement back in the mid-1990s, and that I thereby assisted in demonising an important technological option which can be used to benefit the environment. I could not have chosen a more counter-productive path. I now regret it completely. So I guess you'll be wondering—what happened between 1995 and now that made me not only change my mind. Well, the answer is fairly simple: I discovered science, and in the process I hope I became a better environmentalist.'

One has to admire his courage. He was ridiculed from all sides. How can anyone trust a leader who changes his mind? There is a toxin in the body politic which prevents politicians from changing their point of view. They are castigated in the media for 'flip-flopping' or doing a 'U turn.' Margaret Thatcher famously declared that 'the lady is not for turning.' Tony Blair declared that he had 'no reverse gear.'

But would you buy a car that could not turn or did not have a reverse gear? We need leaders who are prepared to admit, like Mark Lynas, that sometimes they just got it wrong.

A classic example concerns the National Health Service, where we desperately need more empowerment, innovation and experimentation. Yet if different approaches are tried in different places with different results then the media can joyfully deride a 'post-code lottery.' Experimentation by post code would be highly beneficial if we could share the results yet conformity and compliance are preferred.

In business and in politics we need leaders who are prepared to try new things and honest enough to admit when their approach proves flawed.

The paranoid leader never admits they atmosphere in which no-one admits a fault, whistle-blowers are punished and ugly truths are ignored. The courageous leader has the humility to accept that he or she has erred. They encourage everyone to admit mistakes and to learn from them. There are not enough leaders like this.

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About the Author:

Paul was part of the team which launched the IBM PC in the UK in 1981. He became MD of database company Ashton-Tate. In 1993 Paul joined MathSoft, publishers of mathematical software as VP International. He became CEO of Monactive, a British software company which publishes software asset management tools. In 2002 he founded his own company, Destination Innovation, which helps organisations improve innovation. He writes and speaks on lateral thinking and innovation. His latest book is *The Leader's Guide to Lateral Thinking Skills* published by Kogan-Page.

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