Part 1

THE POWER OF TUNING IN

WHAT LEADERS LONG FOR

This book is based on qualitative research involving just over 150 senior leaders from a range of industries. When I set out to write it, I was confident that I knew the problems we all face. I'd faced them too; I was a senior leader in the corporate world for a long time. But I wanted to be sure. I wanted this book to be based on sound research. I selected participants from among my clients and balanced these with participants with whom I had never worked before. I approached them with a short survey of eight questions.

Perhaps one of the most astonishing results of my research was the completion rate: 100 percent. Despite the incredible time pressures they face, senior leaders want to share their problems and insights with people who might help them. They are always looking for solutions.

I asked participants about their dominant problems. Specifically, what are your top three problems? What stresses you out? If you find yourself worrying, what is it about? What are your top three problems?

Time away from operations to think about strategy

Leaders told me that even though they are in a senior role and they know that they should be spending a good chunk of their time working strategically, it isn't happening. Some of the specific comments on the problem of strategy versus operations are:

'The strategy keeps changing. So, how do I devise it and then translate it into operations, capability and behaviour?'

'Balancing the day-to-day operations whilst adding value to the key focus areas'.

'Establishing the agenda amidst other highly competing and revenue raising activities'.

I delved further and asked leaders to put a percentage on the proportion of their time spent working strategically or operationally. On average, it was around 10/90 split. They wanted it to be 20/80. My view, based on observing the best executives, is that the percentage should be more like 40/60.

The worry and sense of being out of control comes through strongly in their answers to my survey questions. Leaders feel anxious that they aren't contributing enough to the strategic direction of their companies or divisions. They feel frustrated by being bogged down in the operational, the tactical, and the minutia and not making the progress required is palpable.

But when they try to tip the balance, they encounter strong resistance. Some, who have made a conscious effort to change their way of being, report feeling guilty. They watch their peers and colleagues rushing around at a frantic pace. They worry about how their executive team will react. Will spending time on strategy be perceived as not putting in much of an effort?

Meaningful connections

The survey participants also felt that the sheer pace of their day restricted communication and connection. A consistent theme was a lack of open dialogue between the executives because they were 'resource poor'. By resource poor, leaders meant they lacked time, capability or capacity.

Q; What do you wish you had more of?
A: Open dialogue among my
executive leadership team.

Participants expressed their communication issues in a variety of ways: 'negativity'; a 'lack of unity'; needing 'an engagement boost'. However, it was expressed, that the lack of open dialogue meant

the leaders sensed a lack of clarity about roles, performance, and the company's vision.

Leaders reported that they could not have the necessary conversations and healthy debate that allowed them to prioritise their company's focus for the next three years. And they understood that without this focus, there could not be a united strategy or alignment around a tactical plan for the immediate future.

They understood that the chance of their team delivering on the strategy is very limited when communication is poor. This meant their executives struggled to prioritise or make the right decisions. They lamented the lack of initiative and focus on implementation among their teams.

Q: What do you wish you had more of?
A: Doers. People to execute what is a
bigger strategy than resources and time
allow but the organisation needs.

Q: What do you wish you had more of?
A: Staff with commercial acumen
and initiative.

A clear sense of what matters most

The lack of communication led back to the cycle of busyness. Because their team did not know the key focus areas, they could

not make informed decisions on the stuff that really mattered. They could not be a real 'dial-turner' for the business; they could not improve the company's performance. And this cascaded through every level within the organisation. Every decision landed back in the leader's lap.

WHY LEADERS STRUGGLE TO FIND SUBSTANCE

These problems impact the brain and its ability to function significantly. Leaders start to operate within limited assumptions. What would be possible if they changed these assumptions and replaced them with a more liberating one? Instead of feeling guilty about focusing on strategy, they might think, *my colleagues see me focusing on the things that matter and they are keen for me to share how I do that*. How would this shift their behaviour, and would it mean it was sustained?

Stakeholders demand more

In the corporate world, the CEO and the executive team have to satisfy and balance the increasing demands of stakeholders. Sometimes these demands seem in conflict and you have to make a decision as to what gets priority. This, at first, seems to be an impossible task. All stakeholders are important and all of them make demands that seem of the utmost importance to them. Some of the major stakeholders are your customers or clients, employees, shareholders, partners, suppliers, distributors, the wider community and, of course, the relevant government and regulatory authorities.