



LEADERSHIP LESSONS

Leadership lessons from BrewDog, Hancock and Southgate

“Leaders need to behave the way they want their staff to,” writes Truants CEO and co-founder, Chris Jefford.

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Most leaders agree that a strong culture lives or dies by the values they set and the behaviours they breed in their employees. Recently, we’ve seen high-profile examples of this working – and spectacularly failing.

I was initially surprised when former BrewDog employees signed an open letter detailing allegations of bullying, poor health and safety, plus a toxic culture with a growth-at-all-costs attitude.

As one employee alleges, “to be treated like a human being was sadly not always a given for those working at BrewDog.”

Ouch.

As someone who has a professional interest in brands, I’ve found the past few years of BrewDog’s crusade rather inspiring. To see that this crusade has come at such a cost was shocking. But for many commentators, the writing had been on the wall: could it have ever been possible to have such a hearts-on-sleeve, outwardly aggressive brand without something going awry behind the scenes?

But – hands up – I’ve been an ardent admirer. BrewDog seemed like a progressive, disruptive and responsible brand, driven by its leaders’ clear values. I was happy to order from them most months. So I was disappointed to discover these values were, like BrewDog’s most recent ‘Gold Can’ PR disaster, lacking substance.

Conversely, when Matt Hancock so grotesquely fell from grace – I use the term loosely – I wasn’t surprised in the slightest. It seemed wholly appropriate that a minister who almost single-handedly redefined the word ‘inept’ should be caught red-handed flagrantly flouting the very rules he set.

To me, it was just another example of those in government feeling empowered to revel in rogue behaviour. An affair over here, a little trip to Barnard Castle over there, a spot of chumocracy PPE contracting in the middle... the behaviour feels endemic.

And it comes from the top.

When a leader like Boris displays, often with pride, such dubious morals himself, it cascades down through the team. Leaders’ actions always set the tone. And if that tone is off-key, an organisation will follow to be wholly out-of-tune.

Building a positive, supportive culture whilst remaining competitive can be hard. I think back to the times that my own business has seen its culture, and by association our staff, suffer – sometimes by just not paying enough attention, sometimes through not adequately living up to our own values as a leadership team.

Leaders need to behave the way they want their staff to. We need to set the tone for work practices, holidays, work-life balance and basic moral values. And keep checking in on it. The minute you take your eye off the ball, it can go wrong very quickly.

And speaking of balls, let’s finish on Gareth Southgate.

A once-maligned choice, Southgate has proven to be a supremely values-driven leader. You cannot but admire the way his leadership cascades through the England team.

Harry Kane's rainbow-coloured armband and the team taking the knee are truly symbolic of their leader's values. Southgate's open letter to fans brought a tear to my eye in a way that's usually reserved for heart-breaking penalty shoot-out defeats. The England squad is thoroughly united through its values. And it's a unity that seems to be working very effectively.

It can be hard work to get team values right and make sure they are properly activated. And it's almost impossible to get it right every time. But seeing a team happy, aligned and pulling together in the right direction is a wonderful sight... and a highly effective strategy.

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