

# Moral Leadership

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In recent years, a developed West European Democracy decided to throw out its old governing party and replace it with a new one.

Such was the unpopularity of the old government the new government won a fairly held general election with a substantial majority. Of the 650 available seats in the parliament, the new party won 411 of the (Source: The Institute for Government 2025). The working majority was 174 (Source BBC 2025).

## Sound familiar?

To readers in the United Kingdom, it should.

Leaving aside the politics of all this, what the UK witnessed was a massive shift in sentiment.

Whether the old party of government lost the last election or whether the new party of government won the election, we could discuss forever, so we'll park that one. We're not here to discuss politics, we're looking at leadership per se, the role and functions of leadership and how all this needs to work.

What is especially relevant here is the concept of leadership and its relationship to sentiment.





The nation's stakeholders – voters – decisively opted to abandon the leadership of one party in exchange for the offering of another as their sentiment shifted.

After this paradigm shift in sentiment, a shiny new government gets the keys to the famous black door in Downing Street, and people start to get their ministerial knees under the government tables. So far so good.

An obvious parallel in the corporate world would be the arrival of a new CEO and his or her senior leadership team.

But what is the purpose of a leader? How should they conduct themselves and how do they know how to lead?

As individuals we are (relatively) free to live our own lives and conduct ourselves in a manner that we perceive to be appropriate. Part of leading our lives is the exercise of our Rights and the discharge of our responsibilities. Outside of personal lives we invest in others to lead us. The boss at work or the political party for which we express a preference at the ballot box.

In the UK we are drawn to leaders that present an offering that appeals to us (or is the least worst option depending upon your perspective). A leader – be it a political leader or a corporate executive – is responsible for our current and future welfare both collectively and individually. In a leadership role, an individual or a leadership team will exercise power, influence, control, and authority. In short, they will set the direction of travel and the speed and tempo of that travel. As a person – or team – leads an ever-greater number of people, the stakes grow exponentially.



Leaders then, need to keep a very sharp eye on the moral compass given the position they have been granted by the voter, shareholder, or staff team. To maintain a leadership role you need to build and preserve a key dimension of leadership itself. Well, several actually but let's start with legitimacy. Legitimacy and credibility go hand in hand. Our new CEO or party leader is safe in that role because of track record, confidence, consistency, integrity (strength of character and then some), general appeal and likeability, apparent honesty and so the list goes on.

Good examples of such a leader are Alan Johnson (former Labour Secretary of State for Education) or David Hunt (former Conservative Secretary of State for Wales) or Baroness Boothroyd (former Labour MP and later the Speaker of the Commons) – all people of exceptional and sustained integrity.

And they all had one thing in common, and we'll return to that magical factor shortly.



Back to our newly installed government. A big majority powerfully enabled the government and gave plenty of elbow room for the leadership to deliver new ideas and new policies with authority. Granted legitimacy by the massive sentiment shift, the leadership set off on a path of delivering change. The compass setting was fixed, so it was time to lead the charge.

What could possibly go wrong for this newly enabled and empowered leader and the team of zealous ministers?



Quite a long list it seems.

Early failures in the leadership recipe were the accepting of free clothes, gig tickets and even gifts of spectacles! Small things but they caused the average Joe-in-the-street to think along the lines of *"Really?! We had this with the other lot in the past. I didn't expect this bunch to accept such obvious bribes"* And they were just that, bribes.

In leadership and Public Life there are few sustainable secrets. Leaders are watched by the Media 24/7 for failures, weakness, and the succumbing to temptation. The new government got over the flurry of little bribes quite quickly and the agenda returned to delivering change. Let's remind ourselves that the new government had a massive majority, delivery of big change would not be a problem.

Let's also remind ourselves that sentiment is a key factor in enabling sustained leadership.



Before too long, the new government's leadership team seemingly sprinted towards, and then collectively fell down, a giant man-hole which was labelled the taxation of farmers' land rights. Farmers are a small part of the working population who hold a largely popular place in the hearts of the wider public – they do, after all, literally put the grain in the bread on our tables. The political leaders who were trying to defend this stance of taxing farmers, backtracked, and said that few farmers would ever need to pay it. Whether that is the case, remains to be seen and the wider politics are complex. The issue is that the consistency of the leadership's original stance was compromised.

We see a progressive diminution of the leadership taking place in the new government despite significant positive steps forward in the international arena. Sadly, it's home turf where the delivery of strong leadership must be demonstrated and seen. And clearly seen to be demonstrated.

HR professionals reading this will see the clear need to have a senior leadership team deliver on strategy and the promises given to the wider stakeholder community surrounding the business. Consider the leadership period and outcome of Marks & Spencer's by Marc Bolland. His reign was generously described as "a conflicted legacy" by Management Today (Management Today January 2016). In fact, the share price stumbled, and the company became ridiculed for its clothing range – the foundation upon which the company was built.





Back at Number 10, international achievements – and they were real achievements – aside, the new government seemed to have learnt little about leadership delivery at home.

In recent weeks we have now seen what could be described as a leadership implosion. This time over the massively sensitive welfare and benefits reforms. With an overall majority of 174 there might be a handful of dissenters and the new reforming legislation would sail through in a vote on 01 07 2025. The Chancellor's financial objectives would be met, and the new government seen as a reforming, forward thinking agency with a common-sense agenda and approach.

Or not.

What collapsed here was just about every single building brick of the leadership house. There were endless cries from dissenting MPs that the leadership team had not consulted, listened, understood, or empathised. There was a legion of pressure groups and charities imploring the leadership not to progress with the new policy until the intended (and unintended) implementation consequences were better understood.

Senior HR professionals need to understand the role of sentiment in an organisation more than most. They need to be able to relay the importance of sentiment to the organisation's leadership team. Those in public office need to grasp this too.



Ironically, there is universal agreement that the UK welfare and benefits system needs to be reformed. Everyone agrees with the “Why and the “What” but everyone was rebelling against the “How”. The government leaders, charged with individual and collective welfare, were going to handle this their way. No U turns here.

In the early days after the level of dissent became apparent the government team stood firm. No compromise and no surrender.



The criticism swelled in terms of scale and volume. Management metal fatigue was turning into serious fractures. Groups within the party membership, the rank and file, joined their voices to the MPs, the affected charities, and the mounting number of pressure groups. The sentiment and mood of dissenters hardened sharply. The majority of 174 u-turned into a likely defeat. Like Marks & Spencer under Bolland, the government was wounded.

The leadership was being undermined and convincingly challenged by those it was supposed to be leading. The weight of pressure on the leadership was causing the key girders to bend and flex until the pressure became such that the leadership gave way.

Where does that leave us?



The government has lost much of its hard-won legitimacy and the leader his credibility. The now embattled leader is seen as out of touch with the parliamentary party, the individual members, the interest and pressure groups and the wider public. The leadership is very badly damaged with negative consequences we are yet to see.

In a nutshell, the sentiment has now shifted. Unlikely to return to its pre-welfare reform cluster blunder state.

## Any why is this?

You'll recall that earlier we wondered about the outstanding qualities and characteristics of Alan Johnson, David Hunt, and Betty Boothroyd. They all shared a single magic factor – they were all expert listeners and could lead effectively because they understood sentiment.

## Ready when you are to learn more

To understand more fully sentiment in your organisation and create a real-time data-based mood map of your organisation, **[please visit us at www.NoWorriesApp.com](http://www.NoWorriesApp.com)**





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