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Can adversaries work together in a political coalition?

Only the tough, the resilient and the driven reach the top. The highest levels in business and in politics are unforgiving environments, where people can be heroes one day and villains the next. Mistakes are rarely tolerated, blame is routinely allocated in an unfair manner, and the media can be aggressive and sometimes just plain nasty.

At the top level there isn't a court of appeal. If the person in charge decides your time is up, that's it. There is fierce competition for advancement in a 'zero sum game' where your competitors are your colleagues and are often ambitious and are independent 'movers and shakers' in their own right.

In short it's not a place where the practice of team working generally finds a comfortable home.

So what hope is there for Britain, and its new Conservative and Liberal coalition? Will the politicians be able to keep it together?

Strong leadership

Working at the top level in UK politics has not exactly been characterised by a cooperative and team ethos up to now.

The UK's institutions reinforce implicit beliefs in the advantages of a competitive and adversarial approach. To the right of the Speaker's chair in the House of Commons are the government benches and to the left are the opposition. The two sides are divided by a space that is exactly two sword-lengths apart - a throwback to the days when weapons were routinely carried.

And the most successful leaders are generally seen to be strong individuals with larger than life personalities like Margaret Thatcher or Winston Churchill with decisive and autocratic styles rather than consensus builders and team builders. People like 'strong leaders' because they believe they make fast decisions and get things done. They reduce uncertainty. People know where they stand.

But 'strong leadership' has always come with a health warning. It may be fast, speedy, and reduce uncertainty, but it can also result in poor and badly thought through short term decisions which fail to take all the relevant factors into account. If leaders don't make the time to consult as widely as they should, they may find their decisions difficult to implement. Remember the Poll Tax, which led to the downfall of Margaret Thatcher.

Recent experiences in the financial sector confirm the dangers. The sector has been dominated by self and ego centred very strong 'cult' figures in CEO positions who pursued their own agendas and ideas, without any influence from their executive colleagues, and in the absence of a strong system of regulation.

Think of the havoc wrecked by Jeff Skilling in Enron – now the subject of a super London West End musical – and the ill judged strategies of Adam Applegarth in Northern Rock. When things were going well they were seen as heroes. But as the environment changed, the dangers in their approach became more obvious. Societies are now paying the price for their autocratic approach.

Advantages of a consensus approach to leadership

While there is limited experience in the UK, there are many places where consensus, coalition and involvement at the top is the norm. Ireland has its own experience of proportional representation and coalition politics; Germany has had coalitions for years.

In fact a more considered approach to leadership can be well suited to the modern world, where problems are complex and systemic and where the use of force to resolve issues is a high-risk option.

It's difficult to see how current global problems such as terrorism and global warming can be addressed without leaders and countries having to work together. Forcing things through is rarely the preferred route. Dialogue and discussion, leading to a shared and deep understanding of underlying issues, generally leads to more considered, informed and well supported decisions.

There is a case for saying that 'strong leadership' doesn't equate simply to 'strong leaders'. A united top team, in politics or in business, can make and achieve better and more sustainable results than any individual leader.

Why team working at the top can be difficult

Still, getting teams at the top to work effectively can be difficult. As Katzenbach and Smith say in their standard text on team working 'There are deeper sources of resistance, more misconceptions and tougher obstacles to forming real teams at the top than anywhere else '

One of the main reasons is that the kind of skills required for people to get to the top are not generally those that support team work. Business Psychologist Prof Adrian Furnham points out that the key skills required to get promoted in most organisations include being bold, self confident, strategic, ambitious, persistent, articulate and astute. Fine qualities all, but individual ones. And there is a 'dark side' to leadership - arrogance, wanting to be at the centre of attention, and a focus on power - which many leaders possess and which don't help teamwork.

Despite the difficulties, most top teams in any field can learn to function well if they genuinely have to - and are really prepared to make the effort.

New behaviours needed

With the UK Coalition, it helps that both Conservative and Liberal politicians have little option but to learn to cooperate if they wish to retain power, that there is a long term agenda, and an economic crisis to focus everyone's minds.

The style needed for coalitions to succeed - collaboration, communication and consensus - require a different mindset and skills. Patience, a long term view, a sense of humour and perspective, a willingness to compromise, personal qualities of self control, emotional intelligence as well as assertiveness are all necessary, together with a lot of hard work. It needs leaders who put the interests of the whole before their own immediate self interest.

Time needs to be spent on developing a shared vision and purpose, improving the quality of conversations, developing a deep understanding of where others are coming from; and on detailed negotiation of specific matters.

Whilst some politicians will adjust better than others, the early signs are that the UK's new political leaders are up for it. There is a lot of goodwill, and the cabinet is young, enthusiastic, and wants to make a difference. They have an excellent opportunity. And what a great role model they could provide for UK business!

Whether the public, stock market, media and rank and file politicians have the patience to put up with it and learn to embrace the new politics, during a time when the going will be very tough, is another matter. The real dangers to coalition aren't from within – it is from attacks by the cynics on the outside. Will the Labour Party really want it to succeed? Will the press give it a chance?

It's not just the politicians who must learn to act differently – it's the rest of us.