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Positive leadership

Interview with Isaac Martín Barbero

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"A manager has to understand how to distinguish between faithfulness and loyalty"



Isaac Martín Barbero | director general for internationalisation at the Spanish Institute for Foreign Trade (ICEX)

Isaac Martín states that one of the things you learn in the world of organisations is that it is more difficult to be loyal than faithful, because sincerity is not always appreciated. He also believes that the older generation faces challenges when gaining the commitment of new professionals since they are more demanding when it comes to providing this commitment.

What values does a good manager have?

Good managers are those who care about people and the project, and know how to balance one thing with the other.

In an environment that moves towards becoming collaborative, can the leader's figure be blurred?

It is not so much that the leader's figure becomes blurred, but that it is more and more necessary that we all have a leadership component.

The fundamental difference between the leader and the boss is that the leader is able to convince, is able

to share a conviction and attract others to these convictions, whereas the boss basically uses the principle of authority. It is precisely in a collaborative environment, and also with the arrival of newer generations to the workplace, that it is more important not to only recruit but to recruit and lead. And generally, the best way to lead is by example, which at the end of the day, is the capacity to transmit enthusiasm. I would not say that the role of leaders is becoming blurred, it is however increasing because more and more, subordinates do not last as long for the boss.

"In an increasingly collaborative environment, it is more important not only to recruit but to recruit and lead"

What do you think about leadership in Spain?

Spain generally places importance on relationships, and in the balance between the importance given to relationships and transactions, we tend to side more with relationships and to what we do in other places. When we are part of a team, it is very important that we understand the aim and feel part of it. Spanish people have a great opportunity in this new environment because the characteristics required are those traditionally found in our country and in our social reality.

What are these characteristics?

We care about people. We often care about what others think. Sometimes we care a little too much about what others think, but it makes us consider sustainability when we make decisions. And we are able to find a reasonable balance between monitoring the aim, accomplishment of the mission and understanding that there is more to life than a statement of profit or loss. Whether you like it or not, nowadays people increasingly refuse to choose between their professional life and their personal life. They look to juggle the two more, they look to work in things they like and they seek to work with people they like. Despite having been through a difficult situation, from an economic point of view, Spanish workers, of any rank, continue to refuse to give up on their aspirations to be in a team in which they feel at ease.

Those who reject leadership purely for being the boss usually "run people into the ground" quite quickly, and they are only left with those who do not have another alternative, excluding the most valuable elements from their environment in terms of generating added value. I believe that dynamism and flexibility of the labour market will have as one of its consequences a deterioration of the system in which those who are not good leaders, those who are not able to communicate, convince and share enthusiasm will successively lose people who they are maybe training,

to whom they will be giving airtime, and just when they are at their best, is when they move on to other places.

How can Spain foster these capabilities?

Management is particularly an area where there is no substitute for experience, and you have to assume that mistakes will be made. It is unacceptable to not make use of those errors in order to learn. I always like to insist on a difference that says there are people with thirty years of experience and people with one year of experience repeated thirty times. This shows the difference between length of service and experience. Length of service represents a succession of things that have happened to us and experience is what we do with what has happened to us. I believe that a manager must understand that their fundamental role is to be a good manager, and once they are a good manager, they can continue to grow; however if they do not manage to recruit others, if they do not learn to listen, if they are only surrounded by people that say yes to everything, they will not go far.

Above all, a manager has to understand how to distinguish between faithfulness and loyalty. Being faithful basically involves doing what we have been asked to do or being at someone's side, whereas loyalty is more demanding. Loyalty demands the courage to say what you think, to say it behind closed doors, defend what needs to be defended, and also in extreme cases. For example, a person who is faithful until the very end is one who would throw themselves out the window with someone who is jumping. A loyal person is one who should surely warn the other who is thinking about jumping out of the window that it is not a good idea. I believe that one of the things you learn in the world of organisations is that it is more difficult to be loyal than faithful, because sincerity is not always appreciated. But it is worth working with people who do appreciate it. Just as one learns how to be a good manager, you also learn to select your own bosses and which managers are worth following.

What are the aspects that young people have had to take into account in order to develop professionally?

I believe that the new generation, and generally everyone, must understand the potential and also the risks of connectivity. We must understand the extraordinary potential of trust and the enormous risk of losing it, it is difficult to regain trust once it has been lost, and we must understand the fundamental role of commitment.

When it comes to these three practicalities, I think that the new generation is better prepared than any other for creativity. I think that nowadays, among other things, it is valued more than ever, because one is required to be different. But also for combining different things.

"Now more than ever, people are looking to work with people that they like"

I believe that the new generation refuses to choose between black and white, and quite rightly. Between permanently black or permanently white, and they are experts in combining things. Therefore, the new generation will be more able than previous generations to integrate knowledge and make the most of the potential offered to them by the world of business and commerce. As César Hidalgo says, when we trade what we do, we gain access to knowledge, experience, life lessons and information that we ourselves do not have.

The new generation is more determined, more courageous, less conformist, and more demanding when it comes to offering commitment. Therefore I think that it is the older generation that has it more difficult, not the new generation. You must make that commitment. Now it is a generation in which when you are convinced by something, you have to share it.

Therefore, those who are capable of this professional honesty, to lead by example, in being the first to board the boat and the last to get off, and not for an exhibitionism of strength, but really for a fundamental conviction, involved in something worthy, they have an almost infinite horizon of people from the new generation that would love to work with them.

These are new times, new rules.

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