



An interview with Lucy Adams

A Disruptive View of the Future

Lucy Adams, previously HR Director at the BBC, has strong views on the HR function. In her recent book *HR Disrupted*, she outlines the case for a radical rethink of HR's purpose and processes. In this highly readable book, Lucy analyses the place of business and work in society. She considers how boards operate, and why they have a conservative, accounting-skewed view of the people agenda. She looks at current leadership models and celebrates disruptive trends that are impacting on our view of what makes a successful leader. She explores the importance of Purpose. And looks at internal communications habits that work, and others that don't.

We caught up with her for a thought-provoking conversation about the future of leadership, seen through the lens of an HR expert.

Mark Johnson, Associate Consultant with Visible Leaders, talks to Lucy Adams about her views on business, society and leadership. .

An Eclectic Start

As Lucy Adams says, very few of us grow up with an burning ambition to work in HR. “The truth is,” she says “I have what some people call an eclectic CV, and which other people call a crap CV. I didn’t really get a proper job until I was thirty.”

This turns out to be just the first example of her amusing and self-deprecating style. Face-to-face she is a force of nature, brimming with ideas, and with a gift for one-liners.

By her thirties, Lucy had established herself as a serious and thoughtful HR Director, working for Serco and then for Eversheds, one of the world’s largest law firms. By now, an eclectic CV had become impressively focused. In 2009, she was appointed to the role of HR Director at the BBC, sitting on the Executive Board, and reporting to the Director General - initially Mark Thompson.

The BBC at a tough time

She held this post throughout some of the BBC's most turbulent years. By 2012, the Jimmy Savile sexual abuse scandal was dominating events. This coincided with other negative press stories, focused on the tax arrangements and apparently over-generous pay-offs for exiting senior managers. Lucy quickly became the media's pantomime villain, dubbed "Lip Gloss Lucy", on account of her supposed obsession with designer labels and expensive handbags.

In 2013, she resigned, having learned the hard way that, in any major corporate scandal, politicians and newspapers need an individual to blame. The more nuanced truth (that her role involved balancing the cost of contractually-based compromise agreements against the uncertain costs of tribunals) was too complex for general digestion or sympathy. As she says of this episode: "I accepted that the public and MPs were angry, and that it was my responsibility to be on the receiving end of this."

The school of hard knocks

Lucy believes that the most important leadership trait is optimism.

“People talk a great deal about resilience, and resilience is of course crucial. Up to a point, you can learn resilience, or – at the very least – you can learn coping techniques that will build your resilience under pressure. But optimism is what really counts in a leader, especially during tough times. And you can’t teach optimism. It’s just something you are born with.”

People with Purpose, page 70.

Lucy was on a roll, exploring a subject that she believes in passionately.

“Do you know” she asks “what psychologists found out about those who endured the horrors of the concentration camps? They found that those who survived the longest were optimists. They had hope. And this hope was part of what kept them alive.”

Continuing in this vein, we briefly dived into the world of the Brexit negotiations. Did she think that an optimistic strain of leadership might help here?

“It depends what you mean,” she replied. “What I do think is that people don’t want to be lied to or soothed. So we want frankness and realism, of course. But we also need optimism. We need our leaders to tell us that there is a way through things. That’s what optimism is about, when it comes to leadership.”

Business, society and leadership

We agreed to set political leadership aside, and talk more about why business leadership matters. And why she cares about this subject so deeply.

“Companies and organisations really matter to society,” she says. “There’s a lot of talk these days about Purpose, and about the drafting of Purpose Statements. In my view, too much energy goes into making these statements short and memorable. And not enough energy goes into creating real, credible stories that genuinely explain why what we do at work matters to society, as a whole.

“I’ve worked for some great organisations where what they do really does matter. As leaders, we need to make sure that our people understand that. Not least because it is motivating, and brings meaning to day-to-day work.”

We moved on to discuss the importance of a leader’s character when communicating Purpose.

For Lucy, to be effective communicators, leaders must be trusted by those they lead. With this trust in place, their stories have more power, especially when personalised. “They are believed, so they are listened to. And if they make a story personal, this adds to the trust that they already have, and the extent to which their stories are believed, absorbed and acted upon.”

As an aside, it's worth adding that Lucy is not entirely optimistic about the extent to which current leaders can command such trust. She outlines a number of reasons for this. Most provocatively perhaps, she complains that narcissists and sociopaths are over-represented in leadership roles currently:

In my view, the reason there's a disproportionate number of high-ego, sociopathic, narcissistic people in leadership roles is because, until now, we've put them on a pedestal and treated them as if they're a different level of humanity.

HR Disrupted, Chapter 13

Lucy likes writing and talking this way. She likes to say what more cautious commentators might shy away from. But this is not simply because she likes to shock. What she wants is for us to listen, and to probe the depth of thinking that lies behind the initial provocation. She is a great business story-teller in her own right. She knows how to get attention, and how to focus her listeners' otherwise distracted minds.

In her view, putting leaders “on a pedestal” has created problems for leaders as well as for the led.

The pedestal problem

Interestingly, we were meeting just before the Harvey Weinstein scandal broke. Just a few days later, Rose McGowan and Ashley Judd came forward with the allegations that were to prove a tipping point in so many ways.

Harvey Weinstein represents the apotheosis of the style of leadership that Lucy Adams is calling out, not only as sociopathic and wrong – but also as ineffective. It's wrong because, even in more dilute forms, it allows leaders to bully and mistreat others. It's ineffective, in Lucy's view, because ultimately it is counterproductive. Nobody wants to be led by a sociopath.

She is highly critical of the idea that leaders should be seen as Supermen or Superwomen with special powers, special insights and with special rights as a consequence.

She goes on: “The trouble with the on-a-pedestal leadership model is that it's ultimately brittle. It lacks resilience. I saw versions of this at the BBC, but I've seen it throughout my career. I've seen people who were great leaders while things were going well. They were intelligent, charismatic, exciting to be around and known for having all the answers. The problem came when the game changed. And when they didn't have all the answers.

“If all your strength comes from always being right and from being better than all those around you, what do you do when this no longer holds true? How can a leader, cut from this cloth, ever say ‘I don't know’ or ‘I'm not sure’? They can't. Or to put it another way, they don't know how to be a human being.”

A more human leadership model

In *HR Disrupted*, Lucy Adams explores the broad themes of the workplace, culture and humanity. She is fascinated by the effect that cultures have on behaviours, not only when it comes to the leadership team, but also in terms of those they lead. The book stands as both a critique of the status quo, and as a practical manifesto for change.

She is highly critical of organisational cultures, reinforced by HR practices, that treat employees like children who can't be trusted, or who have to be protected from what's really happening. This is the flip side of the leader "on a pedestal" problem. Leaders are treated as super-humans, whilst employees are treated as second-class citizens with second-class intellects. Here, she is calling out a status quo that is all too familiar.

Throughout her book, there is an appeal for fundamental disruption of this model. Lucy wants those who lead (and those who might influence those who lead), to disrupt this parent-child, pedestal-down approach. She wants leaders to accept that they are as fallible as those they lead. And she wants those who are led to be treated like intelligent adults.

You get the sense that she is trying to close a gap, pulling leaders down to earth, and encouraging those who are led to stand taller, to insist on their rights, and on their innate dignity. It's a compelling argument, and all the more so from an individual who believes in business as a force for good. She is inherently suspicious of the idea that leaders are special and all-knowing:

“For me, the best leaders are fallible human beings, who own up to being fallible human beings. They are the complete opposite of a Superhero Leader. The leadership traits we should be looking for therefore are about mindfulness, self-awareness, the ability to motivate, the ability to empathise and the ability to socialize.”

This view of leadership leads to a simple objective for all leaders, namely: “to enable the team to do their best work”. For Lucy, this also impacts on the leadership development programmes that HR delivers. “We need to help leaders to become amazing human beings, building on their strengths, and worrying less about the weaknesses that they can’t change. And we need to help them to communicate in a human way, that genuinely connects with others.”

In HR Disrupted, she builds on this point, flagging some of the practical ways in which this vision of leadership can be made real.

Measuring leadership

For example, Lucy recommends disruption of the model in which leaders are measured, top-down by the board:

“For me, measurement of leadership should at least take account of how the led feel about being led. We know what matters here. Those who are led want a leader who cares about them and their career. They want recognition. And they want to believe that their leader is being straight with them, treating them honestly and authentically.”

With leadership defined in this more altruistic way - as service to others - her view is that many of today's leaders are not really leaders at all:

“My estimate is that only about 50% of leaders and managers actually want to lead, when you define the task as ‘helping others do their best work’. Such leadership calls for a genuinely selfless mindset. Instead, what we still see too much of is leaders and managers who define their role in terms of how big their budget is, and how many people they lead. As if this makes them a good leader.”

Lucy's ultimate diagnosis is stark. She believes that many individuals being promoted to leadership roles are simply the wrong kind of people.

Why HR needs disrupting

Her analytical style is nothing if not challenging. Of her own function, she cites research that suggests that 42% of CEOs are “not happy” with HR - or that they are just “OK” with the HR’s performance.

In HR Disrupted, Lucy offers a variety of reasons for this, the most important of which is that HR is not keeping abreast of technological changes and their impact on business models, and related people issues.

Lucy paints a picture of a backward-looking function that is not on top of the battle for talent. She wonders if the more traditional HR departments genuinely understand modern business models and the dynamics of virtual teams. “I’m not sure that most HR people have really figured out how to tackle the issues related to managing, developing and leading people who aren’t based in the same physical space,” she says.

She flags the trend towards reduced job security, and suggests that HR does not quite know how to deal with this. She also highlights the fact that people are working until they are much older, and wonders how many HR departments are really prepared for what this means in terms of appropriate policies and programmes.

Finally, she suggests that many HR departments have no idea how to support leaders in an increasingly transparent world, where media crises are become more frequent, and where public scrutiny is on the increase.

Her ultimate diagnosis of her own function pulls no punches. Her view is that many HR professionals are inherently conservative, paternalistic and inward looking at a time when very different values (commerciality, creativity, outward focus) are called for:

The problem is, despite the fact that all HR professionals face the same challenges regardless of their sector, the HR function isn't rising to them.

HR Disrupted, Prologue

Human-to-human communications

Lucy is equally keen to disrupt conventional thinking when it comes to internal communications. She believes that those who manage internal and leadership communications have much to learn from the marketing function:

“Marketing assumes it is dealing with worldly adults,” she says. “Marketing segments its audience, never assuming that a single version of a message will suit all. And marketing works hard to talk to people in a human tone of voice, to engage and to provoke action.”

Unsurprisingly, she questions the value of the traditional Annual Employee Survey:

“Why don’t we simply ask a small sample what they think - not annually - but whenever we need to? What’s needed is a representative set of opinions. We need to know how people feel. We don’t need to over-egg the process with time consuming annual form-filling.”

Lucy believes that such surveys are a ritualistic waste of time, money and resource. Instead, she asks us to imagine a reinvented, more nimble HR function, designed as a source of insight, intelligence and, crucially, as a source of leadership advice.

She envisions HR as “the people experts”, not only in legal and process terms, but also in terms of the thoughts and feelings of the internal audience, re-imagined as intelligent adults with minds of their own.

visible leaders

But none of this should surprise us. The job of a prophet is to tell us where we are heading next. Lucy Adams foresees a world where leaders will be admired for fallibility, authenticity, self-awareness, empathy and honest humanity. And where such traits will underpin promotion and commercial success.

President Trump, Harvey Weinstein and others from the bully-boy school of leadership may hope that she is wrong. Others amongst us can feel the tectonic plates moving already. Our sense is that the zeitgeist is changing fast. And that those who lead the next generation will behave and communicate in very different ways from the leaders who have thrived in the past.

Get ready to be disrupted.



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