

# Three Cheers!

By Aubrey Warren

This past weekend I joined 10,000 other people for the annual Gold Coast half marathon (another 5,000 did the full marathon, and thousands of others the 10k, 5k, or wheelchair races). It's a great weekend on the beautiful Gold Coast in winter.

I was again struck by the role the spectators play in this event. All the way along the route people clapped, cheered, and encouraged the runners along. Many obviously knew someone who was running, but many were doing it just to be part of the event and lend support. Some held signs ('Go mum!' ... 'Your feet hurt because you're kicking so much butt' ... 'You look so hot' ... 'Why do all the cute ones run away?' ... 'The end is near'). Some played music, and some just yelled encouragement. One lady was leading a small group who were clapping everyone who ran by around the 15k mark and called out: 'Your feet hurt from running; our hands hurt from clapping'.

So, with nothing but kilometres in front of me, I thought a bit about the role of 'cheerleading' in the workplace.

And my first thought was how ghastly the idea would seem to a lot of people. So, let's quickly dispense with the notion of having to be an Energiser Bunny personality or insincerely applauding mediocrity for some sort of 'feel good' effect. Rather, it's about the essential 'encouragement' factor that leadership provides—in a whole range of ways and styles.

Cheerleading has a negative connotation for many of us, implying a manufactured and superficial sense of enthusiasm or support.

Its history in a sporting sense goes back to American football in 1869, but it now extends to many other nations and has become a sporting competition in its own right. The purpose of the cheerleaders (or 'yell leaders' as they were originally known) was to engage the crowd in enthusiastic support for their team to encourage victory.

Whether or not you're a cheerleading fan, you know that if you're the one being cheered on in a tough game or race or project, it does make a difference. It's 'en-courage-ing' when the going is tough, mundane, or just long and tiring.

Every time I run a race I appreciate the expressions of support from race spectators and notice how—in apparently small ways—they encourage the runners to hang in there, keep going, or just bring a smile to our faces with their humorous signs. (When you're a long way from the finish line and the muscles are complaining, it feels great to laugh.) From an individual clapping to a group chanting cheers to someone holding a sign, their efforts provide a sense of occasion and encouragement. It's very different to simply being out on a solo training run. And if you've ever been a spectator cheering on runners or players, you know how it not only makes you feel good, but connects you to the game, the race, the event, and to the people who are playing or running.

So, here are 'three cheers' to consider in the context of 'encourage-ing' leadership:

## The Cheering Leader

'Followers need to feel significant', Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones remind us in *Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?* 'Social psychologists have

made repeated pronouncements on this profound human need for recognition. So it is remarkable how often as individuals we seem to want it but not give it.' Cheerleaders make a point of emphasising the achievements, strengths, and efforts of those on the field or in the race. They don't seem to spend too much time booing, looking exasperated, or complaining. It's important to regularly acknowledge—sometimes privately, sometimes publicly—the achievements and contributions of those who work with us. We all know how easy it is to feel taken for granted.

## The Leader of Cheers

'Cheers!' is a shorthand for 'to your health', an expression used in many cultures and languages. Noting the practice of people everywhere to hold national, cultural, community, and family celebrations, Jack Kouzes and Barry Poser (*The Leadership Challenge*) note that 'Celebrations are among the most significant ways we have to proclaim our respect and gratitude, to renew our sense of community, and to remind ourselves of the values and history that bind us together. Celebrations serve as important a purpose in the long-term health of our organisations, as does the daily performance of tasks'. Leadership is about creating community: interestingly, another thing Goffee and Jones note that we look for in our work.)

Cheerleaders at a game create a sense of celebration, harnessing the emotional energy of supporters. Even in informal situations like a race, one or two people cheering on anonymous runners will often encourage others to join in the cheering or clapping, creating both a sense of community through encouraging participation. What



this creates is a positive, motivating environment. Creating a culture of celebration and appreciation can be an important feature of effective leadership and organisational health.

### **The Cheer-ful Leader**

Cheerleaders are, by definition, cheerful. Which is probably why some of us react negatively to formalised cheer-leading as manufactured enthusiasm. Realistically, we aren't all naturally cheerful (or at least, not obviously and expressively so) and don't want our leaders to be full of cheer all the time: it could quickly wear thin! But we don't want the opposite either, and we do all need signs of positivity on a regular basis; we look to those who express confidence and energy, whether that's expressed gregariously and publicly, or more quietly and personally. We read leaders' behaviours and moods and we know that 'emotional contagion' is as real in workplaces, as much as in sports teams. In *Primal Leadership*, Daniel Goleman cites a study of 62 CEOs and their management teams that 'found that the more positive the overall moods of people in the top management team, the more cooperatively they worked together—and the better the company's business results'. Whatever our temperament or personality, our moods—and how others experience them—matter for the 'good cheer' of our companies.

No doubt there is a cheerleading role for those in formal roles of leadership. But anyone anywhere can lead through cheering others on or just being cheerful. Just like the people on the side of the running course. So, whatever your style of cheerleading, thank you for the positive difference you make. 'Cheers!'

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