

*CCL believes conscious leadership is becoming increasingly important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and that the current challenges demand more of business leaders than they have in the past. Ram Barkai, CEO of Cadiz, is one of the leaders CCL works with, and although unique in many ways, he fundamentally exemplifies many of the traits that we believe leaders will increasingly need in the future.*

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## **Ram Barkai: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conscious Leader who Pushes Possibilities**

**By**

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When first walking into the office of Ram Barkai, CEO of Cadiz, I saw a bright plastic yellow *vuvuzela* and another beautifully painted artefact, not unlike a “*shofar*” - a ram’s horn which is sounded in synagogue during the Jewish New Year. The colourful artefact in fact is a biodegradable, *vuvuzela*, far better for the environment than the plastic yellow one. Beautifully designed, this eco-friendly *vuvuzela* is an interesting metaphor for a highly successful, humble leader, who has strong opinions but does not blow his own horn. It also speaks in a symbolic way to a man who walks his talk.

Highly energetic, Barkai combines ethical rigour with passion, and a strong commitment to sustainability. His quick creative mind shifts from creative metaphor to anecdote, weaving a delightful tapestry which threads together honesty with humour, humanity with business acumen, strong values with high levels of awareness.

Leading by example, value creation and ethics, are central leadership values for Barkai. And so is sustainability. Whether it is about a social responsibility decision to support a factory in Kommetjie to produce ecologically sound *vuvuzelas*, or making choices about personal health and sustainability, or selecting business models to ensure financial sustainability for clients – he is a deeply authentic, unusual and inspirational leader.

Barkai, now 51, was born on a kibbutz in Israel. Early childhood experiences of a more egalitarian kibbutz culture have clearly influenced his leadership style. On a kibbutz you do the work you are good at and are recognised for the work you do, not because you have a

title. He recalls always challenging authority, whether it was a teacher in high school whose views he disagreed with, or standing up to his superiors in the army who in his eyes were failing to lead by example. He leads a highly profitable investment company based in Cape Town, but has little patience for entitlement or the frills that often come with top positions in organisational hierarchies.

Barkai became a major in the Israeli army in his early twenties and then travelled to Asia, in 1987, spending the early part of his career working for Jardine Fleming in proprietary trading and Asian hedge funds, in Japan and Hong Kong. Attracted by the beauty of Cape Town, he moved to South Africa 12 years ago, joining Cadiz as manager of a new division. He was appointed to deputy CEO in 2004 and promoted to CEO of Cadiz since 2005. We explore some of the key themes in his leadership style and management philosophy.

**Bring your wholeness and passion to work – don't save your passion for the weekend.**

Adding value to work and life through passion is important to Barkai. His personal hobby involves swimming to Robben Island and back, or braving the cold, swimming in freezing lakes in sub-zero air temperatures. In fact the locals in the Antarctic, re-named Long Lake, lake after him, as no one had ever taken the risk of swimming in what is the furthest unfrozen water mass in Antarctica. So there is now Lake Ram. He illustrates his passion about passion with a story. He borrowed a pen from a man at a conference. Noticing that the pen was marked with a Harley Davidson logo, Barkai asked the man, if he owned a Harley Davidson. The man proudly said he had a Harley, but only rode on weekends. For Barkai, Cadiz is more like a family where you're free to bring your passion to work. He would prefer that the energy of the Harley Davidson rider is not confined to the weekends, but harnessed in the work place, enlivening and expanding the whole person. He wants his employees to focus on their wholeness, their passion and their full potential. People are encouraged to express themselves fully, a workplace where freedom and individuality is valued.

**A corporate culture which fosters possibility and diversity:** Cadiz is ranked number 1 in the financial services sector in the Deloitte's Best Companies to work for in 2008 and 2009. Barkai believes that happy passionate people are good for business and part of his formula for success lies in choosing freedom and boundless possibility – and finding the **yes it can be done** rather than the no it can't. He values the power of independence and freedom and is inspired by Nelson Mandela's belief that: "Money won't create success, the freedom to make it will." "It is about the freedom to be who you are and that's what differentiates us at

Cadiz.” Barkai appreciates the fact that with technology there are fewer barriers which means that “the world is completely infinite for us, the possibilities are exponential because I don’t have to be in Wall Street to succeed in our market.” Barkai believes that his own ability to break barriers and to push the envelope helps his colleagues extend the limits of possibility and that his swimming successes give him credibility when he tries to push others. “I deliberately try to push in a way that inspires people. I see people push the envelope, but then they plunge in and say I can do it. I have seen it in my ventures. I see it in my swimming. If you have a desire to do that, then do something about it!”

He reveals that the prime priority on his agenda is to create a culture of tolerance where people are valued for their intrinsic worth. He has a passion for diversity, saying he finds it fascinating, exciting and stimulating. “Where there is diversity you simply can’t get bored,” he enthuses, “If the legacy I leave is the creation of a company that is open to anyone, not based on a specific high-school, race, gender or religion, I will be proud”.

**Egalitarian culture – flat structure:** Ram Barkai values the idea of equal rights and believes at the end of the day, “everyone is a person”. He recounts a story about a former boss at Fleming who became a Director and immediately procured a beautiful new green leather desk. “Every morning when he got to work, there was a bottle of Perrier water on his desk. This was only for the Executives, only for the Directors while others had to go to the machine and get their own water. It’s rubbish. If I were a Director, I would ask them to bring a few bottles (of Perrier) for all of us.... If I want to go to a fancy restaurant with a client, then I’ll go to a fancy restaurant, but I’ll not sit here in my dining room while everyone eats sandwiches and I have my own beautiful lunch. “I know so many banks where only the Executives get very nice coffee where the rest of the staff gets simple coffee. You know it’s a real perk that I can get cappuccino”. For Barkai, this is simply nonsense. “How about a cappuccino for everyone or for no-one?”

**Slow time:** For Barkai, the great opportunity provided by the global recession is that people will start to appreciate security, sustainability and the need for planning. “10 years ago, the IT boom was all about quick, quick, quick.” Tom Peters’ message at that time was “load, aim, shoot” and then it became “just shoot, shoot, shoot. You had to be quick....and then it all collapsed. It’s no longer about aim fire shoot, or shoot, shoot, shoot – it is also about slowing down.” So, for Barkai the slower rhythm of planning, the need for collaboration, considering the long term implications of decisions, not simply the quick short term gains become important roles for leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In a recent results presentation to Cadiz

stakeholders, he used the analogy of the Baobab tree as a vision for Cadiz focusing on creating a sustainable business that was about legacy and long term contribution.<sup>1</sup> Barkai honestly believes that sustainability increases productivity and growth as well as security. In his view, more and more business leaders are starting to choose deals that are much more sustainable rather than quick once off short term wins because they realise that “life is just easier if it is sustainable.” In the face of huge pressure to do quick deals, “you should only do the right deals”.

**Doing the Right thing -Going Green at Cadiz:** I asked Barkai how he lived sustainability on a daily basis. He believes it starts with awareness, with small steps and a decision to change your mindset. When the Cadiz Green Initiative was launched every employee was given two recyclable shopping bags. One has to lead by example, “as uncomfortable as it is sometimes” So he and his wife started shopping with the re-useable bags. “In a very subtle way we suddenly realised how many people from the company and their husbands/wives now go shopping with these bags. Sustainability is not about other people, it’s not about getting a medal or anything like that. It’s just being aware that in that rush for success you don’t cut corners.” “We all have learning experiences and mistakes we have made for short term gains. So I try and bring sustainability into everything we do. So we try to bring it all the time into the organisation. Whatever you do, make sure that you are doing it right and for the right reason”. Doing the right thing is a recurring theme when one talks to Barkai and although soberly realistic about the likelihood that greed will continue to dominate capitalism he believes that increasingly there is much more awareness that business is connected with a much larger society. “The consciousness of a much larger society is increasing and it’s important to be aware of that – that you not operating in a vacuum”. And he believes it is easier to do something good in the current business context. “It is much more normal to want to do something good now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century than it was 50 years ago or 20 years ago when people would say just get on with your life.”

**Optimism and humanism:** Archbishop Tutu inspires Barkai “He has an abundance of optimism and passion and yet a capacity to forgive. He is not a push over and the fluffy person you know.” “He’s got strong values..... “To be honest with you, the people that I respect are not necessarily the captains of industry because many times there are so many

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<sup>1</sup> . Carbon-dating experiments in the Zambezi Valley have calculated that trees with a trunk diameter of five metres were more than 1,000 years old, and similar experiments elsewhere have dated trees at over 3,000 years old.

ego's in the industry. I think I prefer people that are comfortable in their own skin and people who follow their passion inspire me." And Barkai remains optimistic, that although he is not happy with the culture of entitlement, he believes that South Africa can still be an integrated rainbow nation.

Though born in Israel, Barkai is a Universalist. His unusual views give inspiration to a country struggling with issues of race, diversity, ethics and sustainability. The *shofar/vuvuzela* I mistakenly thought was a hallmark of his Judaism, was rather a statement about his commitment to sustainability. His parting words say a great deal about the man whose awareness and ethics characterise just the kind of leadership we need in the 21<sup>st</sup> century "I have no religion and I have them all. Sometimes I behave in a more Christian like manner than one of my employees who goes to church and then tries to convert me. I struggle with the concept that I want to be with everyone when I die and that there are different heavens and hells depending on the religion. It will be boring. Humanity is my religion."