

Tough at the top

We all share a fixation on what it takes to be a successful leader. Everything, from sporting success to the collapse of society, can be put down to good or bad leadership but, CIMA's Conference Speaker Jeff Grout asks, do leaders have qualities in common?

While there are many, many books that theorise on the essential characteristics of leadership, it seems eminently more sensible to ask a group of people who know first hand what leadership is really about. So we interviewed 17 leaders – men and women – from the private and public sectors – across business, sport and the military.

The leaders we consulted had remarkably different personalities, with varying strengths and weaknesses. But each had learned, often through trial and error, how to get the best out of their people and their organisation. Often, their actions were instinctive and some even found it difficult to describe what they did on a daily basis as leadership. 'I never, ever think of myself as a leader,' Sebastian Coe told us of his role as chairman of the London Organising Committee for the Olympic and Paralympic Games. 'I just do what I do.'

Dame Stella Rimington, who was director-general of MI5 between 1992 and 1996, echoed this view. 'There are actually very few things, if you analyse them and put them all into boxes, that a leader does,' she said. 'But from the leader flows everything. He or she dictates the culture of the organisation and its direction. Leadership means looking ahead to see where the next challenge is coming from. And that, actually, is all you have to do.'

Acting on instinct

Early on in our research, Professor Brian Morgan, director of the Creative Leadership and Enterprise Centre at the University of Wales Institute in Cardiff, warned us that 'despite the ease with which the characteristics of leadership are listed in textbooks, in practice things are not quite that simple. There is no consistent list of descriptors that can help us identify outstanding leaders.' This point was born

out to a large degree in our discussions with leaders. Rather than meeting some elusive ideal of how a leader should behave, each had capitalised on their strengths, worked on their weaknesses and above all, created a leadership style that was suited to their own personality. This is an important point because it was abundantly clear from our discussions with leaders that it is impossible to appear to be something you are not – people can spot a phoney from a mile away.

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Some of the leaders we spoke to – such as former BBC Director General Greg Dyke, Kevin Roberts, the worldwide CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi, and Major General Patrick Cordingley, who commanded the Desert Rats during the first Gulf War – clearly had a gift for inspiring confidence and even affection among their followers. Even so, their natural affability was supported by premeditated behaviour that ensured their people always felt close to them.

Others, such as Martin Johnson, captain of the World Cup winning England rugby team, and Nasser Hussain, past captain of the country's cricket team, were less outgoing characters but inspired dedication from their team-mates through their



own commitment and loyalty. 'You can't demand respect, you earn it through the quality of your actions,' the former England coach Sir Clive Woodward told us. 'There is no shortcut. Leadership is about respect and it comes from the quality of what you do and how you conduct yourself.'

We went in search of the Holy Grail – a single magical recipe for successful leadership. But it doesn't exist. The best leaders have a portfolio of styles and approaches and the instinct to know when to use them. They are constantly changing their focus – from the present to the future, from the internal to the external, from taking control to letting go. ■

Further information

Hear more from Jeff Grout (above) at the CIMA Training and Development Conference on 9 October, at the CBI Conference Centre, London, and find out how you can get on the route to successful recruitment and retention of your finance professionals. Take a look at the programme and book your place at www.cimaglobal.com/conference. Alternatively you can contact Imogen Cooper on 020 8849 2265, or email her at Imogen.cooper@cimaglobal.com