

The leadership imperative

Nigel Lynn, of Hewitson Walker, explains that leadership is about much more than technical ability – inspirational and motivational qualities are also crucial.

As one of the UK's longest established recruiters of finance professionals, we've seen the range of skills demanded by employers of such individuals broaden with every passing year. Where once pure technical ability was sufficient, now interpersonal skills, an aptitude for selling ideas and a capacity for developing people are equally important.

However, from some point soon after the turn of the century, combining all these talents under the umbrella of 'good management' was no longer enough to guarantee a seat around the boardroom table – you also needed to be a leader.

But what does leadership really mean – isn't it just basic management under a different name? While there are obviously common elements to being a manager and being a leader, the key extra factor is perhaps best highlighted in the dictionary definition, which describes a leader as someone who guides or inspires others. Consequently, at its best, leadership can achieve much more than simple management.

In a survey of 50 global companies, the research firm ISR found a direct link between effective leadership and commercial performance. In organisations where their superiors received an 'average' leadership rating from employees, sales improved over the course of a year by just over 6%. But in organisations where they were rated highly, sales rose by more than 10%.

Why? Perhaps it is because, as military and industrial historian Correlli Barnett puts it, leadership is '...a basic connection between one animal and the rest of the herd. Leadership is not imposed like authority. It is actually welcomed and wanted by the led.'

Nature or nurture?

So, given how important leadership qualities obviously are, do you have to be born with them, or can they be learned?

Some of the world's major business schools have set up specific leadership departments that ostensibly suggest that you can learn how to lead in the classroom. But even these schools appear to admit that the real picture is more ambiguous.

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According to David Sims of the Cass Business School: 'We have come to the conclusion that the idea of the "born leader" does not stand up; born to lead what, when and with whom? The idea of leaders being "made" is equally romantic – nobody knows how to "make" a leader.'

Perhaps therefore, the best way to develop leadership skills is to recognise your own inherent abilities and then hone them on the front line of the workplace.

And the most efficient and effective way of doing this is to watch out for the successes and failures of those around you. Having done just that for more years than I care to remember, here is my own personal checklist of what makes a good leader:

- 1) Communication – delivering your message in a clear, effective



and emotive way can take you a long way.

- 2) Clarity – people like to know what is expected of them and what objectives they are aiming for.
- 3) Decision making – good leaders don't vacillate. Be clear about what you think and where you are going.
- 4) Adaptability – at the same time be flexible enough to react to new challenges and opportunities.
- 5) Approachability – an open door policy will encourage your team to communicate openly and honestly with you at all times.
- 6) Sensitivity – make sure that you know if your people are not happy. Anticipate their moves and act accordingly.
- 7) Vision – a certain amount of vision and the ability to see the bigger picture is vital.
- 8) An example – expect from others what you expect from yourself. Leaders belong at the front, not at the back. ■

Further information

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