

Leadership

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“Good leaders are an essential mix of rudimentary instincts, provided for them in their most basic biological building blocks, and persistent self-development.”

The long running debates between the ‘true born’ and the ‘nurturists’ around just how leaders are created has rumbled on far too long. This writer’s view is very simple – children are born with lots of potential, none of which will reach its peak if it is not developed. There are just as many people with the innate leadership skills within them that do not make it into positions of leadership as do. This has much to do with motivation but we are not going to enter into that excessively large debate.

The ‘Charismatic’ leader has been the particular focus of attention over the years and has been the perfect example for the natural born supporters lobby to hold up as proof of the accuracy of their argument. However, to suggest that they are merely a sum total of the same genes they had when the midwife slapped their behind, is a ridiculous insult to the hard work and effective learning they do throughout their life. That is why I would prefer to refer to them as effective leaders – no more, no less.

Effective leaders hone their skills many ways. They learn from elder statesmen, study and practice. Most of all, however, they learn by **doing**. The best leaders learn quickly that making mistakes along the way is inevitable so the important thing is that you recover quickly from a mistake and not let it dissuade you from leadership in the future. Good leaders work on their resilience and capacity to recover

seemingly poor positions. All great leaders will quietly tell you just how many mistakes they made along the way and that they failed their way to success. What is important to them is that they have a cumulative positive result from their efforts over time.

Much ink and paper has been expended trying to create a single definition of what leadership is and the competencies demanded of a good leader. I won’t try to summarise this whole effort or develop my own apparently distinct definition. For now I would ask you to regard leadership and management as interchangeable to a large extent though I contend that leadership is much more about the hearts and minds issues than simple management of resources.

It has seemed like a continual feature of business life these last several decades that new

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paradigms for leadership are being sought by business leaders the world over. In the UK we are deluged with books, CDs or DVDs, training courses and professional qualifications galore to tempt the aspirant leader and current incumbent alike. All in an attempt to persuade us that a new practical paradigm has arrived that can elevate you and your business to ever greater performance and results. There is now a

recognized ‘condition’ that robs people of their time and money in large measure. Known as TCAP, or to give it its full name – Training Course Attenditis Perpetua, it draws people into an invidious cycle of attendance at training courses that is deeply persistent in nature and difficult to stop or assuage. Indeed these people can draw a significant proportion of their feeling of self-worth from persuading their superiors to finance their little training ‘addiction’. Worse still are the superiors who want to foist training on weary managers who really have seen all this stuff before but must now, once again, put on their best faces to satisfy their superiors that they are entering into the true spirit of the development.

Perhaps at this stage you may be forgiven for thinking that I am heading towards my own conclusion which is that this plethora of management development material isn’t really needed? Far from it! As a consultant offering management development services myself that would be a somewhat disingenuous stance would it not? All too often many of these development activities over-promise and under-

deliver. As the motivation of the course is replaced by the drudgery of the journey home, course notes gradually lose their appeal and are consigned to the darkest shelf in the darkest room to gather dust like all the rest. The main reason for this is that too many of these courses focus almost entirely on the transfer of knowledge alone. The better ones give skills, whilst the best allow sufficient time to ensure action planning that covers changes to attitudes

and behaviours to allow new found knowledge to be successfully deployed.

Developing leaders takes a long time and must involve activity beyond mere knowledge acquisition. This is the biggest issue I have with higher level qualifications such as an MBA. At the outset I will hang my colours out in support of people studying such courses. However they have their weaknesses and the chief amongst them is the fact that they are predominantly about acquisition of lots of knowledge at the expense of skills, attitudes and behaviours. Not problematic in itself but unfortunately the acquisition of large amounts of knowledge equips too many MBA alumni with the very worst of new traits – an unhealthily enhanced belief that knowledge alone makes them great leaders. Even those companies with well developed MBA associations remain nervous of the potential pitfalls that can accrue when allowing someone to go on a masters course. If you are to participate in this level of leadership then set some rules: –

- Have a minimum length of service criteria to ensure sufficient in-depth knowledge of how the organisation works in order to make a potential difference in their MBA project work
- Ensure the student contributes to the course costs and mostly uses their own time for study
- Ensure that a formal coaching relationship is established between student and a senior manager / director, thus allowing behavioural and attitudinal aspects of their development to be considered and worked upon. It is this coaching that will help to keep the aspirations and abilities of the student firmly aligned to the direction and needs of the business sponsor.

Coaching as a continuous method of leader development would provide a better option. It is the most reliable method of developing your own leaders but it is not without its potential

drawbacks if not done well. If expectations of how complete a leader can really become are too high, and they frequently are, then the new leader is just as likely to drown beneath the waves of expectation as rise to walk on the water of success. Leaders should not be



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expected to be all things to all people but far too many HR departments sponsor ridiculously comprehensive leadership competency models that no mere mortal could aspire to. Equally there are silly debates about whether the coachee should focus on enhancing their strengths or improving their weaknesses. The answer is simple – work on what is likely to have the most benefit at that

time for the development of the leader and for the good of the business. Recognise too that new skills and behaviours take quite some time to acquire and to use competently. It is a common understanding that a simple new physical task may take up to 21 days of regular practice to embed properly. Learned and automatic behaviours will most probably take even longer to address fully.

Another popular method of leadership development is the outward bound course. As a lover of outdoor pursuits (and a previous outward bound leadership course attendee) I can tell you that they are normally very enjoyable. But the claims about just how transferable the experiences are back into the workplace are usually heavily overplayed. The simple truth is that much of the experience will not transfer back into the workplace at all. Their value as an experience is usually more about people being able to interact in a more relaxed way than they would normally at the workplace. People frequently feedback that they now saw their colleagues in a different light after being on outward bound together. Trouble is that most outward bound courses are filled with unremitting activity and thus limit this opportunity to interact.

Good leaders are an essential mix of rudimentary instincts, provided for them in their most basic biological building blocks, and persistent self-development. One without the other will not produce an effective leader. Don’t stop yourself from investing money on developing the leaders of tomorrow but make sure that it is money well spent. Develop those individuals who show the motivation to suffer all the bad elements of being a leader as well as the good. As a final point don’t forget to review the type of corporate culture you want these leaders to work within to ensure that you give them the best chance to succeed rather than create an inevitability of misdirected effort and the surety of growing resentment and frustration.