

Is leadership the art of never having to say you're sorry?

Thomas International considers the world of politics and suggests what it can teach us about business leadership

Learning points

Key leadership attributes are:

- choosing and managing teams;
- being an expert in one or more areas but NOT every area;
- consistency;
- integrity;
- decisiveness;
- two-way communication.

Former PM Tony Blair seemed to see leadership as being true to your own convictions; not being swayed by flavour-of-the-month arguments; looking for constant change and improvement; using focus groups to inform, but not decide, his opinions; and measuring what's going on to see if things are working. It can be argued that Gordon Brown, after a fairly big blip, has returned to this mix of conviction and management techniques.

Running a political party is like running a large (arguably not-for-profit?) organisation of any kind. So, what can we learn about the increasingly important issue of leadership from these political shenanigans?*

What is a leader? Borrowing from the respected US psychologist Bob Hogan, a leader's only job is to **build teams that work**. That was the success of Margaret Thatcher in her early years as PM and the disaster of her final years.

The obvious implication is that the key leadership skill is **choosing and then managing people**: not just as individuals but as people who work together. Of course great leaders will probably be competent in a specific area – economics, defence, health, marketing. They need to demonstrate that to win support. But ultimately their job is about people. Governments at the end of a long period in power tend to have run through their really gifted people and their cabinets look threadbare. Their ability to increase the talent pool is limited.

You can't **demand respect** as a leader. It has to be given. As soon as Blair started referring to his own leadership qualities – particularly after the Iraq war – opinion polls fell. Your background and experience count for nothing; every time you're in a new position (or have a new employee) you have to prove yourself again.

So how do you generate what is sometimes called followership. As we say above, you demonstrate that **you know what you're talking about** in particular areas. You don't spring surprises (see the article on football for the issue of consistency of behaviour).

There are more books about leadership published each week than celebrity biographies but ask most employees what they want from a leader and you'll get:

Integrity: this doesn't mean being a goody-goody. It involves doing what you say you're going to do; not taking the short cut in pursuit of advantage; returning employee loyalty in kind. Tony Blair saw this as one of his strengths, but one suspects most political leaders share this view. The proof of the pudding is in the eating and leaders that own up to mistakes (like Labour cabinet minister Robin Cook) are held up as examples - often after they've resigned!

Decisiveness: leaders are paid to make the difficult decisions, quickly, make sure they stick and take responsibility whether they're right or wrong. All great political leaders do this.

Communicating: if the leader doesn't tell you where he's leading you to who else will? Politics tells us that people see through professionally trained communication...what has become known as spin. Leaders should talk turkey in the language of the people they're talking to, not management-speak. They should spend as much time on listening and ensuring they listen to different sorts of people as on shaping what they say. Long term governments lose this balance; so do long-time managers.

The bottom line is that around two thirds of all leaders in Western business fail and even those who have been successful go past their sell-by date. Thatcher and Blair, two hugely long-serving Prime Ministers should have left earlier. A change would have helped them and their party.

Leadership has an element of ability – reading a balance sheet, understanding production, taking in market information. But it's **largely about behaviour:** the leader's own behaviour and his or her understanding of other peoples'. Maybe we ought to ask the major parties to use instruments like PPA in choosing their new leaders?

* They say never talk about politics and religion! So this article expresses no preference for any of these parties or leader's political programmes. We're concentrating on leadership style.