

# Leadership: A personal view

Thomas International products are used widely in the identification and development of leaders. Our clients recognise effective leadership as a critical success factor in successful organisations.

We asked Ian Florance, who advises us on testing issues, to give us his personal views on leadership, based on 30 years management experience, knowledge of business psychology and consultancy.

More is written about leadership than any other business topic. Despite the appearances of science (competing theories, a technical language) 99% of this theory is trivial, pretty obvious or based on little more than raising consultancy fees. Even good thinking on the topic begs a lot of questions; how does it translate into concrete action when you're faced with declining sales figures and a rebellious senior team on a wet Tuesday afternoon?

There's no menu of actions, based on a single world shattering idea which will win you the Leader of the Year trophy. It's simpler than that but it's more subtle.

## Defining Leadership

There seem to be two ways of doing this. The first is to look at people who are supposedly successful leaders and trying to isolate what is special about them. Hence autobiographies by famous business people, books looking at successful organisations by business gurus and titles like, 'The Leadership secrets of Napoleon, Shackleton and Sven Goran Erikson.'

My problem with this approach is that leadership is different in different organisations, different cultures and depending on the leader's gender. Shackleton didn't reach the South Pole, Napoleon lost Waterloo and...well, your guess is as good as mine about Sven - saying they're great leaders is begging the question.

The second way is a dictionary definition. There are thousands of these. I heard a good one recently: 'A leader ensures an organisation does what it says it's going to do consistently.' The last word is crucial. Managers who deliver great results in a company and then move on just before it collapses – I've known a few – aren't leaders: they're pests.

There's another way of defining leaders: distinguishing them from managers.

## Managers vs. Leaders

The distinction between managers and leaders has become commonplace. Managers look after processes, are short-term and tactical. Leaders are visionary, charismatic, set the long-term vision, manage change and motivate. You get the picture: managers are rather boring technocrats who pore over numbers or carry spanners; leaders are Jonny Depp or David Bowie.

I don't buy this on any level. If you have people reporting to you you're a leader. Even if you work on the 56th floor there are processes you have to monitor. The more we move into an international service economy, the more managers/leaders have to understand and work through people. Managers and leaders apply the same sort of skills and qualities to slightly different situations...

## Do Leaders have certain common qualities?

Yes, of course! Research, development work and common sense tries to distil the personalities and abilities common to good leaders. I make no apologies for simplifying here because there are a head-spinning number of theories in this area (contingency, charismatic, path-goal and instrumental are just some of them ).

Research shows a number of traits that leaders share ranging from adaptability and ambition to influence, energy and stress-tolerance. There's no one accepted list and its being added to the whole time. You can find examples easily and a lot of initial assessment in leader development work involves defining what qualities successful leaders need in particular organisations. Thomas International do a lot of work in this area.

I'd like to emphasise some points here:

- Different qualities are more or less important in different organisations. You'll need to be more dominant and assertive if you're responsible for getting a paper out every day at 5.30 than if you're running a team of suicide counsellors. And the traits will express themselves in different ways;
- Don't underestimate good health and high energy levels. Leaders rarely fall asleep in meetings or take 10 days sick leave a year;
- Intelligence is important. You need enough to impress your reports and follow the conversation. But you don't need to be the smartest person in the room. Good leaders have both good critical reasoning – the ability to evaluate arguments about topics where they're not experts. They need to be happy that their reports are cleverer or at least more knowledgeable than they are about a certain area. Being too smart drowns out other voices. Trying to understand everything is a no-win : Jimmy Carter the Us President shows the failure of the latter strategy.
- Leaders understand themselves and the effect they have on people. To do this they have to understand something about what makes people tick. Assessing and training emotional intelligence has become such a growth area because this is such a core business skill.

## What Do Leaders Do?

I think this is an easy one: they motivate people to achieve what they said they were going to achieve. To do this leaders have to understand that other peoples' motivations are various. The reasons we do something at work might be driven by anything from a desire to be rich, safe, praised, or busy. Work may even provide our social life – a prime motivation for older work-returners.

How leaders motivate will differ depending on the person they're dealing with. But there is some consensus about what leaders actually do to create a motivational environment:

- they're consistent. When some people walk in to the office you're not sure: 'which one of them' is going to appear- the depressive, the comedian, the attack-dog or the nice, considerate person; or which 'role' they're in: the CEO or the good mate. Consistency doesn't mean doing the same thing all the time; it means having some core principles which guide your behaviour so that your behaviour makes sense to other people;
- they communicate and they communicate in a certain way. They DON'T use business speak. They use hard facts and figures but they're personally involved. Their communication involves listening and they have a varied network of different sorts of people so they know what's going on. Favoured inner circles are death: they give the wrong messages and provide distorted feedback;

- they spend time making sure teams are fit for purpose. In particular, they know their own weaknesses and create a team with complementary skills. They value difference;
- they make decisions quickly, often based on inadequate evidence and take responsibility for them. Many people don't want this sort of responsibility and see it as their managers/leaders job to make key decisions.
- they address problems – particularly people problems – quickly, decisively and fairly. The easiest way to lose respect and authority is to duck or delay an issue of underperformance or inappropriate behaviour

## Followership

A dreadful word but it encapsulates something crucial. You can't demand buy in as a leader: it's given. The leader's job is not to say ' You must follow me: I'm a leader.' You can pinpoint the collapse of Tony Blair's approval ratings from the moment when he said something very similar to that.

## Leadership changes in time and place

Leaders have certain traits you can identify, skills you can teach (see below) and responsibilities, but this is the alphabet of leadership. The language will change depending on where you are and when:

- Most leadership books deal with big corporate environments. Leadership here is different from the issues in an SME. Running a small organisation allows you to communicate more personally. That's easier. But it means you're more often 'on show' so consistency is more difficult.
- A lot of leadership books are American. The culture is different. UK leaders tend to be less formal, more prone to use humour and deal with people who are less financially literate or turned on by business speak.
- Diversity is widening the language that leaders use to express their common personality traits, skills and attributes. More women are becoming leaders. More leaders come from different cultural backgrounds, with different religious traditions and sexual orientations. Not enough, but these new leaders are altering styles.
- Leadership in the 60s was different from leadership in the 90s. Leadership has fashions like music, dress and car styling. This shouldn't lead us to dismiss these very specific ideas: we all adapt our expectations of others to trends and fashions. Three newish leadership ideas reflect our times and provide some valuable insights:
  - the leader as sports coach reflects sports' increasing popularity and the genuine advances sports psychology has made in areas such as goal setting and motivation.
  - authentic leadership. serious concerns about corporate behaviour and issues such as the environment have introduced a new element in leadership. It's not just about driving to financial performance; it's about being personally committed to both a way of doing things and what you do.

- o the leader as crazy person. Leaders are under increasing stress. Some crack: some lie, cheat and steal. Improved research into both mental illness, personality and corporate misbehaviour has highlighted how leaders get it catastrophically wrong and why. Some of the coverage of this idea is sensationalist. Some creates useful tools to help leaders overcome the undoubted stresses and dangers of their jobs.

## Leadership is a job!

British industry has long been criticised for promoting people above their level of competence. Just because you sell a lot or design a new piece of kit doesn't mean you're qualified to lead a team undertaking these tasks.

Leadership is a job you have to learn. There's no shame in admitting this. A boss of mine was promoted from marketing to managing director. I went into his office and asked him, over an empty desk, how it was going. 'I'm the least experienced person in the company at my job,' he said. 'I've got to learn what I'm supposed to be doing.'

The US has long realised this. UK education and training lags far behind and that's why leadership development, mentoring and coaching are huge growth areas in the UK. We're catching up.

Can you learn leadership? Yes...some of it. Some you can't and in some cases you need to do a cost-benefit analysis: why spend time learning something you're never going to excel in, when you can hire a specialist.

Before setting out on a fascinating learning journey get a detailed view of your own capabilities. This is where tests come in. They give you a base of information on which you can build your strategies and, in so doing, help you understand more generally how people operate. Get feedback on your personality and emotional intelligence. Get a 360° feedback and, while you're at it, commit to talking the results seriously. Even better, do the same with your core team. A leader doesn't operate alone; best to learn about the people he or she operates through.

And beware of things you think you know. We all know how to write and speak don't we? We all understand about people? Well, no we don't. Communication and psychology can get over-complicated but learning the basic ideas is essential. These are key tools for the leader and going back to re-learn what we may have forgotten or passed by is time well spent.

## To sum up

I worry about leadership.

When someone says 'I'm a leader' they're often patting themselves on the back. When other people say it to someone you can see the recipient accepting the praise and preening.

Let me be clear: leaders can hone their skills, but other people decide whether they've achieved the status. Leading is a job, not a state of grace.

As I said at the beginning of this article, the whole area has been over-complicated for reasons of book advances and research grants. Leaders enable organisations to meet agreed objectives consistently. The distinction between managers and leaders sounds clever but doesn't really stand up to scrutiny.

Past this point, leadership is subtle. Leaders' primary tools for achieving their goals are people: themselves, their owners, their direct and indirect reports, their customers, their suppliers. So it's fairly obvious leaders must understand people, be able to communicate with them and act in a way which makes them want to achieve those goals. They must understand their own limits and be honest about them.

The danger here is that we all think we know these sorts of things, or write them off as soft or beneath our notice. They aren't. They're a body of knowledge: the leader's knowledge.

Finally, those of you who use creativity techniques will know that taking a business problem out of the work environment and viewing it in a completely different context helps us see the wood for the tress. So, who are the leaders in our social life? Whose suggestions for where we eat, where we go at the weekend are usually accepted? Who herds the cats?! What is it about that person that causes this effect: are they the loudest, the most opinionated; do they speak rarely but effectively; are they kind or abrasive; are they the first person to jump into your mind when the word 'friend' is used? Identifying these factors then translating them into your work can help.

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