

PART ONE



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Chapter 1

Characteristics of Leadership

I have no special gift. I am only passionately curious.

Albert Einstein

What does it take to be a leader? What skills, strengths and personality traits do you need? Leadership literature is certainly not shy on suggestions – and you can guarantee that words such as ‘charisma’, ‘determination’, ‘commitment’, ‘passion’ and ‘vision’ will crop up frequently. But, as Brian Morgan of Cardiff Business School points out, in practice things are never that simple. ‘There is no consistent list of descriptors that will help us identify outstanding leaders,’ he says. Morgan quotes the views of the business theorist Peter Drucker on entrepreneurs: ‘Some are eccentrics, others conformists; ... some are worriers, some relaxed; ... some drink quite heavily, some are

total abstainers; ... some are people of great charm and warmth ... some have no more personality than a frozen mackerel.’

Drucker’s entertaining observation is equally true of leaders. As Martin Glenn says, there is no right or wrong way to lead, there are just different ways.

‘When I first got into management I used to think about the right way to behave and I think that came from a lack of self-confidence. The conclusion I’ve come to over the years is not that anything goes, but that there are a vast variety of effective leadership styles. There is no cookie cutter for leadership.’

Goffee and Jones agree with this view: ‘Books on leadership persistently try to find a recipe for leadership,’ they write.¹ ‘Beleaguered executives are invited to compare themselves with lists of leadership competences and characteristics – against which they always find themselves wanting ... In our view, there are no universal leadership characteristics. What works for one leader will not work for another.’

The leaders we spoke to would agree. All had contrasting views about the characteristics that make for a great or successful leader. Honesty, integrity and moral courage were words that cropped up frequently. As Charles Dunstone, chief executive and co-founder of the Carphone Warehouse puts it: ‘There’s quite a lot of bullshit written about leadership but at its core, leadership is about integrity. If people believe in you and what you are trying to do, they will follow you. If they don’t, they won’t.’

Leaders consistently make the point that they can form a clear vision and have all the skills necessary to communicate their plans throughout the organization, but they will get nowhere unless people recognize that they believe in what they are doing. ‘Underpinning everything is your values, it is what drives you,’ says Sue Campbell, chair of UK Sport. ‘Your sense of fairness and honesty.’

This viewpoint reappears over and over, irrespective of the field in which the leaders operate. Nasser Hussain, who captained the England cricket team between 1999 and 2003, says that honesty is ‘absolutely key’ to good leadership. ‘Players have to believe in you and trust you in order to play for you. Michael Atherton [who cap-

tained the side when Hussain first joined the team] was as honest as anything and I would have played for him forever.’ Military leaders make this point most forcefully, saying that morale is the first thing to suffer if soldiers are not convinced that their cause is right and that their leaders are fully committed to it. ‘It’s terribly important that you believe in what you are doing and what you are asking your people to do,’ says Major General Patrick Cordingley. Field Marshal Lord Inge agrees, saying that the soldiers have to trust in the ability of their commander and in his belief in them. They also have to trust that in the event of war, the leader will not put their lives unnecessarily at risk. Kevin Roberts, the worldwide CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi, describes the business world equivalent as ‘loyalty beyond reason’.

Closely linked to this need for integrity and belief in the shared vision of the organization, is passion. ‘You need to have passion about you,’ says Nasser Hussain. ‘That might mean wearing your heart on your sleeve, as I did, or having an iron fist in a velvet glove, which is the Michael Vaughan way. Outwardly he is smiling but inwardly he has a great passion to make things happen.’ Gail Rebeck of Random House says that ‘100% commitment to the organization is absolutely essential; a passion for what you are doing’. Lord Inge characterizes this phenomenon of good leaders simply as ‘love’ for their organization:

‘When I left the army I joined the board of Racal Electronics, which was run by a remarkable man called Ernie [Sir Ernest] Harrison. He loved Racal. I think he was the 15th employee ever to join the company, and he clearly loved it. As well as having a detailed knowledge of how the City worked, how the products worked and how the organization worked, he clearly loved Racal and I think that’s very important. If someone is in a company only to make money, it won’t be a great comfort to anyone who works there.’

One of the most challenging aspects of leadership for many people is striking the right balance between making decisions as a leader and encouraging a creative atmosphere in an organization where

innovation and ideas can develop. Inevitably, this will involve developing a working environment where people feel able to question and challenge decisions. ‘Leadership is about not taking yourself too seriously, in my view,’ says Colonel Bob Stewart. ‘It means understanding that even the most humble person can help you, and can lead too.’

Colonel Stewart tells of the advice his father, a Royal Air Force officer, gave him when he was about to enter Sandhurst for officer training at the age of 17.

‘I was terrified about what I was about to go through and overawed by everything I saw. As I approached the Grand Entrance Dad said to me, “Remember, Robert, the Queen gets diarrhoea and always looks downwards before you look up”. That’s leadership in one sentence, in my view. It describes how an officer and a leader should behave. You engender enthusiasm, confidence and trust by clearly backing your subordinates.’

Many leaders make the point that one of the fundamental requirements of a good leader is that he or she is good at the underlying job, and not just at leadership itself. Major General Patrick Cordingley makes the point that even if a leader is not actually doing what he is asking his followers to do, it stands to reason that he has to understand exactly what he is asking of them.

‘It sounds ridiculous but if you are a brigade commander of 150 armoured tanks, you have to know how they work. You will have an adviser alongside you but you still have to be an expert in the range of the guns and how they fire. And when you come to a minefield and a sapper tells you that it is 100 yards wide and looks as though it has anti-tank mines, you have to know how you get through it. You have to have all of that knowledge, you really do.’

The fighter pilot, Sharkey Ward, adds that it is vital, in his sphere, to be good at the job. ‘You can still be a leader if you’re not, but it makes life a whole lot easier if you are top notch.’

Sporting captains are, of course, on the field because of the quality of their own playing talents. Nasser Hussain says that he was told by the selectors after being appointed captain to make sure that he looked after his own game. ‘There’s nothing better than having your

leader out there, fighting from the front and getting runs himself,' he says.

Decision-making lies at the heart of any leader's role (Ron Dennis, chief executive of McLaren, argues that taking decisions is the leader's primary function). Martin Glenn believes that this demands the clarity of thought that characterizes a good leader. 'It is possible to have leadership in chaos but it's hardly ideal,' he says. 'You have to be able to simplify complex situations so you can create a hierarchy of things that are important.' Dame Stella Rimington, the former head of MI5, agrees: 'You do need a clear mind. One of the dangers of being a leader is that you can get cluttered up with things. You have to be able to sort out the important stuff with clarity from everything that is coming at you.' Keeping sight of this vision while an organization copes with the change that inevitably goes on around and within it is a constant challenge for today's leaders, demanding flexibility and foresight as well as a steely resolve and a willingness to take risks. It is also why leaders can be in a painfully lonely position.

John Kotter argues that while management is about coping with complexity, leadership is about coping with change. 'Management is about doing things right. Management is survival,' agrees Kevin Roberts of Saatchi & Saatchi. 'If all you do is management, you will survive but that does not provide competitive advantage in today's environment.'

The distinction between management and leadership is a key issue in understanding what makes a good leader. According to Professor Brian Morgan of the University of Wales Institute, leadership and management are different and distinctive but they share some complementary skills. Both are necessary to run complex organizations but the key difference is that management is about planning, coordinating and putting appropriate performance systems in place. Leadership, on the other hand, is about being visionary, proactive and anticipating change – or even responding positively to change. Managers can be inspirational but leaders create the capacity for people to do something different – to do more than they would normally do.

These skills are harder to pin down and the leaders we spoke to put forward a number of different theories. ‘A leader has to have perspective on the business, and has to be able to see around corners,’ says Martin Glenn. ‘A leader also should be able to challenge convention and be open-minded and creative. Should you always take rules literally?’ Colonel Bob Stewart agrees that leadership is about ‘challenging the status quo. Don’t just accept the rules. If the rules say it can’t be done, bend them or change them. A leader is someone who makes things happen and takes risks.’

It is an interesting reflection of the more ‘modern’ style of leadership that is prevalent today – empathetic and authentic leadership, rather than the command and control model – that many of the leaders identified emotional skills as one of their key characteristics of leadership. ‘I think leadership is more about emotion than it is about logic,’ is the view of Field Marshal Lord Inge. ‘If you can get hold of a man’s or woman’s emotions, you have the key. All the great leaders have this gift.’

‘The classic statement is that you can’t lead unless people follow so you have to have that ability to understand what makes the people around you tick,’ says Dame Stella Rimington. ‘I think it goes back to genuinely listening and trying to understand what is really going on, and then moulding that into something that will take you in the direction you need to be going.’

The leaders who naturally adopt an empathetic style of leadership – most notably Greg Dyke, the former director-general of the BBC – say that it seems obvious to them that employees who are respected, trusted and treated well will perform to the best of their ability.

‘I don’t do detail, I never have done, and I have the concentration levels of a peanut so I am very happy to just believe that people will come up with the results if you let them get on with it.’

Sir Clive Woodward, who coached the World Cup-winning England rugby team, believes that people develop respect for a leader that cares about them and their well-being.

‘You can’t demand respect, you earn it through the quality of your actions. There’s no shortcut. Leadership is about respect and it comes from the quality of what you do and how you conduct yourself.’

It comes from taking an interest in each individual person and helping them improve.’

The military leader Colonel Bob Stewart echoes this view:

‘The first principle of an officer is that you lead by example and care for the people below you. I learned when I was a platoon commander that the key is to get the respect of the soldiers. Little things matter, like visiting them if they are ill. You don’t need a pip or a star on your shoulder in order to lead. You want people to follow you because they wish to do so.’

Greg Dyke adds that effective leadership can only happen when the leader is not only respected but loved within the organization:

‘I came across someone recently from the London Business School who had been teaching leadership for years. She said she had always taught that you don’t need to be loved as a leader but you do need to be respected. But over the past five years she has changed her mind. She now says that the only way you can move and change organizations is if you are loved. Bill Gates is loved. Phil Knight of Nike is loved. Jack Walsh was tough when he was at GE – he got rid of about 10% of the workforce a year for a while – but the people who were left loved him. I would really like to go and talk to the people at Marks & Spencer about Stuart Rose. I suspect that they love him because he saved them. They had spent the previous 10 years being told the organization was rubbish and suddenly they are good again.’

There are many other characteristics that make for a successful leader. Heather Rabbatts, who became chief executive of Lambeth Council after replying to a job advertisement for ‘possibly the worst job in local government’, understandably says that leaders should be willing to take personal risks:

‘You have to be brave. I couldn’t go to Lambeth and not be brave, so I think you do need strength of character and resilience. I am quite driven and I want to see things work. I’m like an adrenaline junkie. The more pressure you put me under, the better I am.’

The one element that is completely out of control of leaders, though, is luck, both in terms of their journey up the leadership ladder and in terms of their career at the top. ‘There is a story about Napoleon being presented with several candidates for promotion to General,’ says Colonel Bob Stewart. ‘All of them knew their trade and were outstanding leaders. And Napoleon said that they were all clearly good candidates. But he asked which of them was lucky!’

THE CHARISMA QUESTION

John F Kennedy had it and Bill Clinton has a great deal of it. So, on the other hand, did Hitler. Charisma – variously defined as extreme charm and grace, or a magnetic quality, or an uncanny ability to charm or influence followers – is a source of endless debate in the field of leadership. Do leaders need it? Can you be an effective leader without it?

In a command and control model, a charismatic leader is not strictly necessary. In a leadership model that depends on inspiring and persuading employees to follow, it can be a positive bonus. That said, an overly charismatic leader can occasionally hide some deep-rooted problems within an organization, as the pensioners of Robert Maxwell’s Mirror Group will testify. Some organizations perform poorly with a charismatic leader, others perform mercurially with a leader that has, as Peter Drucker puts it, the personality of a frozen fish.

Some of the leaders we spoke to have that quality that could be defined as charisma – Kevin Roberts, Sue Campbell, Heather Rabbatts and Sharkey Ward would certainly fall into that category. Others have more ‘quiet’ personalities but are nevertheless strong and effective leaders.

It is possible to fake charisma and many leaders agree that there is an element of conscious drama to their role, and that at times they must ‘act’ as leaders. Unsurprisingly, the leaders we spoke to are split on whether charisma is a necessary quality for leadership. Sir Clive Woodward does not believe that charisma is necessary at all:

‘Leadership is about respect, not charisma. I see charisma as meaning that the leader has a charismatic personality or a high profile and I don’t think you need that. There are people out there who are nothing like that who are still outstanding leaders.’

Heather Rabbatts agrees, but adds that she used to believe that charisma was important in leadership.

‘I have met people since then who are not personally charismatic but who are very effective. There are people, and I would include Greg Dyke among them, who, when they walk into the room, the atmosphere changes. And there are others, such as [Tesco chief executive] Terry Leahy, whom you wouldn’t immediately notice had walked into the room. Yet he is clearly a very talented leader and whenever I hear him talk he is insightful and interesting. So I don’t think it’s a requirement, but it makes a difference. If you have some presence and charisma it helps you to win people over. You don’t need to work quite so hard at motivating them.’

‘You have to have an ability to take people with you – some people have that and some don’t,’ says Charles Dunstone of Carphone Warehouse. ‘I remember talking to somebody about [the former Prime Minister] John Major, and they said to me that if you met him in private he was the most fantastically interesting and charismatic man. I guess that he would have to be because you don’t get to be Prime Minister if you don’t have that quality. But somehow he could never get that across publicly and that was ultimately his undoing.’

Sebastian Coe, who is a former MP and adviser to the former leader of the opposition William Hague, says that the charisma and charm of Tony Blair was a huge asset during the final bidding process for the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Singapore in 2005:

‘Some people just have that presence and fill a room as soon as they walk into it, and he has that. We all know plenty of people in all walks of life that can be funny and amusing around a dinner table but when you put them behind a microphone, it doesn’t work. It’s a huge asset to have presence in politics. Because of the television age it’s almost a dealbreaker if you don’t have it. I don’t think charisma is a luxurious add-on. You can’t lead people unless you excite them.’

Sue Campbell of UK Sport agrees that charisma is extremely helpful as a leadership trait but argues that there is a clear difference between an extrovert personality and charisma. 'If you are in the presence of Nelson Mandela he doesn't gabble on but he is instantly charismatic in a soft way. You do need to have a certain kind of presence where people get a sense of who you are and what you are about. I think that comes from an inner confidence rather than anything else.'

Dame Stella Rimington agrees with this point:

'There are the kind of leaders, which I am not, who can come into an organization convinced about what they want to do and who carry it through by the sheer force of their personality. That's all very well, wowing everyone with your charisma, but in the long term the people have to buy into what you are persuading them to do. They might initially do that but in the end doubts will begin to creep in if the plan does not have a firm basis. That said, I think charisma is important because people have got to want to follow you and they tend to follow people who have that ability to express themselves and convince people.'

Dame Stella's point, that ultimately what matters is that people believe that the leader is right, is a recurring theme. Gail Rebeck of Random House argues that people tend to respond to leaders who show themselves as they are, vulnerabilities and all. 'If you do that I think you can develop a presence that people are willing to follow,' she says. Martin Glenn touches on the point that there is a fine line between charisma and megalomania. 'Anyone who has a massive ego will start off by being less effective as a leader unless it is counteracted by some form of brilliance,' he says. 'I've had one or two bosses like that, with egos the size of a planet, but brilliant. They can just about pull it off but what they don't do is lay down the tracks for the future people to build upon. Their legacy tends to be about how good they were in the current situation.'

A SUBSTITUTE FOR CHARISMA

If you are not fortunate enough to be born with the mystical quality of charisma, there are other options. Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones

argue that one of the qualities of inspirational leaders is that they recognize and capitalize on what is unique about themselves. ‘Often,’ they say, ‘a leader will show his differences by having a distinctly different dress style or physical appearance, but typically he will move on to distinguish himself through qualities like imagination, loyalty, expertise, or even a handshake. Anything can be a difference, but it is important to communicate it.’²

Jones and Goffee argue that inspirational leaders use these differences to deliberately signal their separateness from their followers, which in turn they use to motivate others to perform better. ‘They recognize instinctively that followers will push themselves if their leader is just a little aloof,’ they say. Some of the leaders we spoke to, however, make the more basic point that a quirky characteristic – anything from a distinctive personality trait to a handlebar moustache – simply makes them recognizable and easy to describe to others, which can be an invaluable attribute (particularly when leading a large organization). Richard Branson, head of Virgin, for instance, is easily recognized predominantly because he does not look or dress as you might expect the chief executive of a multinational company to appear.

In the armed forces, of course, the problems of recognizability are magnified by the fact that a leader is in charge of thousands of identically dressed soldiers. ‘It’s always quite helpful if the commander of a company or battalion has some affectionate but defining characteristic; maybe he speaks in a curious way,’ says Major General Patrick Cordingley. ‘As a commander you have to be known by your troops so it is quite useful to have some sort of feature.’ Sharkey Ward adds that the Fleet Air Arm has a history of eccentric commanders. He cites one commander who always went to war with his favourite piece of literature in his pocket. ‘It helps if you have a particular quality, or a certain something that endears you to the men, which in my case might be standing up to the more senior officers rather than being a “yes” man,’ he says. ‘I’m something of a legend because of this attitude. Getting things right has to come first. You couldn’t really call it charisma.’

Other leaders have made the most of their own particular defining characteristics. Heather Rabbatts says that her Jamaican mother

would be horrified to see her striking, long curly hair and flowing clothes:

‘My mother would want to straighten my hair because that is what you do. I definitely get treated differently if I am in what I call my “corporate look” as opposed to more “me”. It’s something I’m certainly aware of, particularly at Millwall [Football Club]; because of the very white fan base I certainly stand out. I think that probably helps me in that environment.’

Kevin Roberts, the worldwide CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi is also well-known for always wearing a black t-shirt and trousers, whatever the occasion. His anti-establishment habits make him highly distinctive, although he says it all comes down to personal choice:

‘I never wear a tie, not even if I’m seeing the board, and they all accept that. It’s all OK as long as I continue to deliver. I won’t go to a formal dinner if I have to wear a black tie. These choices are open to all of us most of the time. People compromise or follow their peers but I’m not big on that, and I don’t expect it from other people either.’

LEADERSHIP BY OSMOSIS

The fact that no-one can agree on a definitive list of ingredients that makes for an effective leader illustrates how the understanding of leadership has changed in modern times. As John Kotter points out, the traditional view of leadership is based on the foundation that leadership is the province of a chosen few and that leaders are effectively born with the necessary skills. The organizational environment, however, has changed beyond recognition and continues to change at an alarming speed.

Kotter argues that twenty-first century organizations in the business world need to be dynamic and adaptive and this demands a different form of leadership. Leadership in the modern business world relies to a far greater extent on teamwork and encouraging leadership behaviour throughout the organization, he says.³ This implies that more and more people are learning to develop leadership skills throughout their career.

Learning, of course, starts early but the best leaders continue to improve their skills throughout their lives. Most of this learning comes not from books but from observing the behaviour of others. In the following chapters we will look at how upbringing, education and people influence leaders and the way they behave.

WHAT LEADERS REALLY DO

Leaders believe that:

- At its core, leadership is about integrity
- Trust should move in both directions
- Good leaders are rarely poor at their underlying job
- Clarity of thought is an essential skill for leaders
- Leadership is more about emotion than it is about logic
- Leaders should lead by example, not direction
- Luck inevitably plays a part in anyone's career
- Being different helps to set a leader apart and makes them easily identifiable.
- Leaders should set a clear direction.

¹ *Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?*, p10

² *Why Should Anyone Be Led By You?*, Harvard Business Review, September-October 2000, p 69

³ *Leading Change*, p 175

