

## Bottom of the Class – Leader of the Pack

### Time for Some Clarity

Winston Churchill is famous for his lack of academic achievement. He went on to be a truly great leader, however. My great uncle was his personal policeman in his constituency after the Second World War. He described him as a man with a very clear sense of himself (not surprising given what he had done), but with an aura that was almost an ‘animal magnetism’.

Is that part of what singles out someone as a leader? There are plenty of other examples of successful leaders without a qualification to their name. Invariably they were all clever though, with charisma. Maybe being less conventional with a lot of self-confidence can help, but from what we see it is not the whole story.

#### **Shining Bright Might Not Be Enough**

Brilliant individuals are not necessarily good leaders, but they can be. We have worked with many smart and confident senior executives, law partners, finance sector ‘high flyers’ and others. We’ve seen how they can falter when addressing the challenge of stepping out of their ‘comfort zone’ as successful experts and into leadership roles.

#### **A Leader for All**

Self-confidence, focus, energy, robustness and a willingness to tackle change are all factors that help leaders to inspire colleagues, who like to be led from the front. Leadership requires additional qualities to motivate a broader range of followers at a more intrinsic level.

These include communication of and commitment to a common purpose, an ability to give, receive, learn and develop from feedback, emotional engagement with and understanding of others’ perspectives and often with some humility and compassion. Some of this can be very challenging for a successful results-driven executive or ‘subject matter expert’ for whom direct action and a delivery focus has worked well so far.

## Walking the Tightrope

There is a delicate boundary between the confidence and congruence of really effective leadership and the arrogance of imposed authority. It is the ability to find that edge and operate on the right side of it that attracts followers. It isn't merely self-interest, reason or position that creates trust and persuades people to invest their time and effort to meet demanding organisational objectives; it requires an emotional connection with their leaders.

## Leadership Is In All of Us

Not all executives turn acquired positions of authority into effective leadership, and not all executives sense or feel able to accept an invitation to give leadership when it is needed. But the ability to lead *is* something that can be developed.

In a nutshell, we believe leaders need to have capability in 3 key areas:

- *Developing vision and strategy*
- *The ability to implement and execute plans*
- *And inter-personal skills – communicating with their team and other stakeholders*

In addition, these need to be supported by 10 necessary and visible qualities that others experience, that help to create emotional connection and together, these represent a way of 'being', a shift in attitude, thinking and beliefs - rather than something that is practised by rote:

1. *Honesty and authenticity (a basis for trust)*
2. *Clarity of purpose (linked with the vision and strategy)*
3. *Belief (that is visible) in that purpose*
4. *Robustness, calm resilience and credibility (including appearance)*
5. *Systemic empathy (being able to connect with the broader 'zeitgeist' as opposed to empathising with each individual)*
6. *Comfort with change (not for the sake of it, but as appropriate to achieve objectives and move with changing circumstances)*
7. *The ability to accept and learn from challenging feedback*
8. *Presence*
9. *Positivity and drive (energy)*
10. *Agile responsiveness and comfort with ambiguity*

Does this successfully distil the totality of previous literature and thinking about leadership? Probably not, but it does outline what, in our experience, has helped our clients as they develop and grow as leaders.

So don't worry if you were always top of the class. All it means is that you have it all – you are smart and have the insight to learn the ways of those behind you. And if you were the 'dunce' then history says you could still make a great leader.

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