

The attributes of leadership

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Reports the conclusions of a study involving in-depth interviews with 18 business leaders, focusing on the qualities and skills they felt to be essential for success in directing and guiding a large organization. These qualities include the ability to make sense of a complicated pattern of events and from this formulate clear goals for the organization; people and communication skills; integrity; drive and ambition. In selecting others, as potential future leaders and high-flyers, this group of current leaders used the following criteria. There was high agreement that proven track record was vital, both as an indicator of future performance and to establish credibility. Another important characteristic is the ability to take an independent (even unpopular) line, and defend it. As could be predicted, interpersonal skills, team orientation, commitment and motivation were also seen as important.

This article reports the conclusions of a study involving in-depth interviews with 18 business leaders. They were chosen to fall into two groups: the first group of nine were in their mid-50s or older with reputations among their peers and the public as outstanding managers/leaders. These individuals were either no longer actively managing companies, or had been in the chief executive role for over ten years. They were:

- Sir Graham Day: ex-chairman, Cadbury Schweppes, British Aerospace and Power-Gen.
- Baroness Jean Denton: ex-managing director, Heron Drive and Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.
- Richard Giordano: chairman, BOC; chairman, British Gas.
- Sir John Harvey-Jones: ex-chairman, ICI.
- Sir Christopher Hogg: chairman, Courtaulds and Reuters.
- Steve Shirley: founder director, FI Group.
- Sir John Egan: chief executive, BAA.
- Sir Neil Shaw: executive chairman, Tate & Lyle.
- Lord Sheppard: chairman, Grand Metropolitan.

The second group were newer, and as a group younger, chief executives, who had been five years or less in the role. It is noted that two of the new chief executives are in their mid-50s (Neville Bain, Charles Mackay) and less than a year separates them from John Egan, who has been a chief executive for over 15 years. The new chief executives have been chosen because they have had outstandingly successful track records, appear to be particularly promising and for one reason or another have careers of particular interest. They were:

- Penny Hughes: president, Coca-Cola Great Britain and Ireland (until 1 October 1995).
- Archie Norman: chief executive, Asda.
- Martin Taylor: chief executive, Barclays.
- Bill Casteil: chief executive, Amersham.
- Gerry Robinson: chief executive, Granada.
- Ann Iverson: chief executive, Laura Ashley.
- Liam Strong: chief executive, Sears.
- Neville Bain: chief executive, Coats, Viyella.
- Charles Mackay: chief executive, Inchcape.

What, then, is so special about leaders? What sets them apart? How can you tell whether

someone is a leader? What are the attributes of leadership? Numerous empirical studies have been devoted to identifying the special qualities or characteristics of leaders. Different variables have been selected, evaluated and subjected to analysis, attempting to provide a scientific basis for a list of leadership characteristics. No study of leaders has yet produced a description of leadership qualities that is recognized as statistically significant.

What, then, are the views of our business leaders about the qualities of leadership, what do they look for in their high-flyers and do they believe that the chief executive in the year 2000 will be different from today? What does it take to reach the top in business?

If there was consensus, it was on the impossibility of defining a set of necessary and sufficient attributes that define leaders – all agreed that business leaders come in all shapes and sizes, with different styles, approaches, strengths and weaknesses. Several people were also swift to demystify the notion of business leadership, reinforcing that chief executives are not heroes, not perfect, but share the same all-too-human mixture of strengths and weaknesses as the rest of the population.

If no checklist is finally adequate, everyone none the less had a view about the relative importance of key qualities for true leadership which not surprisingly resonated when business leaders identified the strengths they sought in the high-flyers within their companies. In summary, these qualities were found to be vision, people skills, character and drive. Evidence of such qualities and leadership potential was sought in track record, the ability to operate effectively in teams, commitment to organizational objectives and independence/willingness to be counted.

Leadership qualities

Vision

Whether described as “long-term strategic thinking”, vision, “seeing the wood for the trees”, “the big picture outlook” or “helicopter vision”, almost all business leaders, supported by the leadership literature,

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give vision as the *sine qua non* of leadership attributes, exemplified by Jean Denton's pragmatic "if you don't know where you're going, you have no hope of getting there".

Most consider the goal, the purpose, the mission or the vision in business necessarily to be a simple one. Gerry Robinson is swift to demystify vision as complicated:

There is a tendency to think of a vision as something rather sophisticated and complex but actually most visions are terribly simple. "I will rule the world" is the most classic and most simple of all visions, isn't it? You do have a vision as to what it is you are trying to do, at both a personal level and at a corporate level. It is important to be very clear, very repetitive, very simple about that. It is essential that people know what success is.

Neville Bain provides the classical expression of strategic vision making:

The leader has got to have a clear vision that is capable of being enunciated in a simple way. At Coats Viyella we have a company mission statement and objectives which provide a statement of values and a framework. It is a bit like the rules of the game. You give your team freedom but there are some guiding principles they need to understand. It's not novel - just straight old standard business school principles applied to our business but it's had a big impact. Then the leader makes sure that he has got the right troops in the right jobs, gives them room to do their job within the constraints that he sets down, and helps them as team coach.

But where does the ability to think strategically come from? Is it independent from or related to intelligence? At least one business thinker, Kotter while also demystifying vision persuasively emphasizes the importance of intelligence in its operation:

Too often, I fear, we fall into the romantic trap of believing that great vision comes from magic or divine grace. In the business world, it rarely (if ever) does. Great vision emerges when a powerful mind, working long and hard on massive amounts of information is able to see (or recognise in suggestions from others) interesting patterns and new possibilities (Kotter, 1988, p. 29).

Does it in fact require a "powerful mind" to lead a complex business successfully? Although there was some ambivalence expressed on the need for high levels of intelligence, many people recognized it as important for leaders of large organisations, because of the enormous complexity of business. In Christopher Hogg's words:

Whatever else it is, business is an intellectual exercise. I could never understand how the impression arose that industry was a place for morons. I personally find it

fantastically demanding on intellectual resources. You are dealing with an enormous range of variables. You are always trying to make decisions on inadequate information and against time. It means a constant process of selection of priorities.

On the other hand, Gerry Robinson, believing that business is essentially straightforward, does not share the view that high levels of intelligence are required of business leaders:

The danger of a high intellect is that it can veer into over-intellectualizing a business problem that is essentially very simple. People with lots of nous but average intelligence can be enormously successful in running large companies. You can learn very quickly what the ten key issues are in a company and unfortunately seven of them will be the same every time for every company!

As did Kotter, Kets de Vries (1989) notes the relationship between creating the vision and the leader's ability to recognize patterns and relationships in disjointed events (p. 201). Leaders are seen as "reducers" who are able to limit the stimuli impinging on them, handle multiple activities without discomfort and deal with complex, novel, interesting situations "without impaired task performance, cognitive disorganization or health problems" (p. 202). Gerry Robinson in examining a complex environment and articulating a simple vision is clearly a "reducer", as is Penny Hughes, as she describes the ease with which she charts the right direction:

I have an uncanny feel for business which I find hard to share with or teach other people. It probably goes back to my training as a chemist and my maths. Without a calculator, or bit of paper I can work out the value of any decision almost to the last pound which really makes decision making easy. I think I have got a clear strategic brain and one that reaches the bottom line very quickly.

People and communication skills

People skills, an ability to communicate with and motivate people were recognized as fundamental to leadership. Given that by definition a leader needs followers, the vision must be compellingly and clearly communicated to motivate people to action. Although the leadership literature speaks of charismatic or inspirational communication, it is very clear from our sample, that not all business leaders are extroverts. In fact, many of the most successful are introverts.

It is clearly less eloquence than credibility that matters in motivating people. Thus, no one spoke only of the need for communication skills. Jean Denton spoke of the ability to share the direction with people openly and honestly; Gerry Robinson of the need for

consistency and people knowing where they stand; and Martin Taylor of the ability to inspire trust. Martin Taylor himself enjoys above all the emotional and motivational aspect of management and describes his approach to management as "feminine". Fundamental to motivating people is genuinely understanding, appreciating and empowering them. Penny Hughes believes that at the heart of her success is that she values people and creates an environment where they want to give of their best. Richard Giordano agrees: "Having forged a vision and charted a course, the leader must create an environment where performance is valued, where people want to perform". Indeed, closely related to the ability to inspire trust were the next qualities identified by the majority as important to leadership.

Integrity/character

Perhaps the rather old-fashioned word, character, best epitomizes a set of qualities that people judged to be fundamental to true leadership. These related not only to honesty and fairness but also to compassion, humility and being one's own person. Thus, above all else, Graham Day believes honesty to be integral to leadership. Martin Taylor looks for courage, generosity and imagination and Richard Giordano, Penny Hughes and Ann Iverson, fairness. Bill Castell values sound personal qualities and sincerity. Christopher Hogg emphasizes the importance of putting the organization first, in order to win trust.

Not a single business leader supported the importance of understanding organizational politics or of cultivating image – getting to the top is, or should be, overwhelmingly about substance and performance. As Penny Hughes expresses: "Tact and awareness are important, but the world is moving quickly enough for performance to be more important than politics". An integral part of earning the trust that is so vital to leadership is being one's own person and, as Gerry Robinson notes, there is a necessary loneliness to leadership. In this context, Bennis (1989) speaks of the leaders "mastering the context", refusing to be deployed by others (pp. 36-7). Thus Richard Giordano points out the need for both self-discipline and emotional stability to stay the course in leadership. Liam Strong looks for "strong-minded" people and understands that in an emotionally demanding role such as CEO, his emotional "durability" is necessary.

Along with self-mastery comes non-conformity, marching to one's own drum. The ability to challenge and lack of conformity is supported by Cox and Cooper (1988) who tested 26 managing directors and found all to

be "innovators" not adaptors, according to Kirton's (1982) adaption-innovation inventory. They found that managing directors "do not get to their positions by following rules and accepting authority" but by challenging the system, seeking new solutions which also "challenges the myth that the way to the top is to 'toe the line' and not 'make waves'" (p. 41).

The common assumption about the narcissism and "large egos" of leaders was at odds with another frequently cited attribute of true leadership, particularly by the older generation – the requirement for humility. For Neil Shaw, lack of arrogance is the key ingredient of leadership. Linked, at least in part, to humility and people skills was the importance of courtesy and compassion in leadership. Graham Day, having witnessed the power of implicit courtesy first-hand from Buck Crump, the chief executive at Canadian Pacific, notes:

Fear does not leadership equal. A friend of mine, Manfred Kets de Vries who teaches at INSEAD, used to teach at Harvard with Abraham Zaleznik. Zaleznik taught organizational behaviour and used to say "we're woefully short of substance, humanity and morality and these are the attributes of leadership. It's not the gung-ho, follow-me, John Wayne kind of fix".

Consistently, although few in the sample were conventionally religious, all expressed a well-developed belief system or set of ethics that provided both meaning to their lives and an ethical foundation for their actions. Many people showed a strong sense of duty and social responsibility and spoke particularly of their involvement in the community. Bill Castell, Neil Shaw and Allen Sheppard were committed to the developmental value of community involvement for their people.

Drive/ambition

Without exception, the business leaders described themselves as ambitious and the need for exceptional commitment and drive was explicitly recognized by most people. Richard Giordano spoke of dedication to winning, Archie Norman about "driving energy", Iverson and Denton of a desire to come first, Charles Mackay about willpower and determination. Many leaders attributed their own success simply to not giving up but, it was reinforced that excessive personal ambition, that put self before organization, was counterproductive. Closely related to drive, hard work and long hours were accepted by most as necessary to business leadership, although there was evidence that some members of the younger generation

seek better balance between their professional and personal lives.

Other attributes

Vision, interpersonal skills, character and drive were the four attributes considered by the majority to be necessary for business leadership. No doubt other necessary attributes such as good health, energy and stamina were "taken as read". Indeed, physical abilities were rarely mentioned although Steve Shirley mentioned the importance of "good genes, health record and high energy" and Christopher Hogg advises people to stay fit. Above all, John Egan sees the ability "to learn, to change and to motivate" as critical to leadership, reinforcing the importance of an open and learning approach to experience. The business leaders also were optimists and enthusiasts, with the propensity, in the words of Ann Iverson and Christopher Hogg to "see the glass as half full".

Selecting leaders and high-flyers

Selecting the right management team is fundamental to successful business leadership and several people noted that they continued to make mistakes in this area, usually because they were over-optimistic about an individual's capabilities. As the hopeful evaluation of potential, and the taking of calculated risks, is critical in giving those with promise an opportunity to prove themselves, the best one can hope for is to reduce mistakes through understanding the attributes important to success. Although there was the expected correlation between the qualities they saw as necessary for leadership and those they sought in their management team, there was also some difference in emphasis.

Track record

Above all, in selecting their high-flyers, business leaders looked for experience and a track record of success. In identifying the attributes of leadership, track record had been taken very much for granted. Yet Kotter (1988) points out that demonstrated success might be the basis for continued success, because of the need for credibility and that proven performance and continued performance are vital in order to retain leadership.

Attracting and maintaining the large network of resources necessary to accomplish a sound agenda demands enormous *credibility* which in turn usually requires (1) a very impressive track record and a good reputation (2) solid co-operative working relationships with lots of the relevant players in the industry or company or both and (3) the interpersonal capacity and integrity that

are needed to develop credible relationships with a broad set of people fairly easily and quickly (p. 29).

As pointed out by McCall *et al.* (1988) the limitation of using successful track record alone is that this may not distinguish executives who later succeed from those who later derail. The authors suggest evaluating a cluster of skills/abilities in addition to examination of track record. (Including ability to set reasonable agenda, ability to handle diverse relationships, temperament to adjust to given of managerial life, integrity, treatment of others, self-insight, ability to learn from experience) (p. 165).

Interpersonal skills and team orientation

Indeed, the ability to get along with others, specifically as a member of a team, was identified as critical in promoting young managers.

Commitment and motivation

People who were not only highly motivated to succeed personally but, more importantly, who were committed to organizational objectives distinguished themselves. Neville Bain speaks of the need to be hungry for success, Steve Shirley of the importance of high energy, Liam Strong of people taking their work seriously, Archie Norman of people who are still fighting.

Independence

Business leaders looked for people who would tell them the truth, however unpalatable. Neville Bain sought "irritants in the best sense of the word"; Archie Norman, people who are willing to put their head above the parapet and disagree with him; Ann Iverson and John Egan people who took responsibility and John Harvey-Jones those with originality of view. People, therefore, sought the same strength of character in their subordinates as identified more generally for leadership, but expressed this most fully as autonomy and willingness to be counted. Clearly these attributes are quite rare and of great value to chief executives who need the truth but are so often told what people believe they want to hear.

Other attributes

The majority of people valued experience and track record; interpersonal skills; commitment, particularly to the team; and independence above all in selecting their high-flyers. In addition, in choosing members of their senior management team, many people recognized the importance of balancing individual strengths with several explicitly referring to

Belbin's (1981) work on the composition of effective teams and the importance of including different personality types and perspectives. Christopher Hogg and Martin Taylor both seek people with strengths different from their own. Charles Mackay looks for a combination of "producers and organizers" at Inchcape. Graham Day in choosing future leaders looks for a "good basic education as broad as possible, both qualitative and quantitative".

Leadership in the year 2000

In 1989 Korn/Ferry International in conjunction with Columbia University Graduate School of Business undertook a study of over 1,500 top executives in 20 countries to gain an understanding of what they considered would be important to leadership in the year 2000. The study entitled "Reinventing the CEO" examined perceptions of what was required of leaders both at the time and in the year 2000 in terms of areas of expertise and personal characteristics. With this report in mind, and also the sort of changes envisaged by such business writers as Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Charles Handy, Tom Peters and John Harvey Jones, I asked the business leaders in the study whether they thought that the attributes of leadership would be different in five or ten years.

Just as "Reinventing the CEO" concluded that the ideal CEO of the year 2000 "will not be able to meet the new demands by abandoning proven traits", many chief executives emphatically believed that the personal characteristics of leadership would not change fundamentally, except perhaps to require more of the same. As Jean Denton expressed, "where the good people are now is what will be required".

The changes in personal characteristics are neatly encapsulated by Richard Giordano's view that successful managers will have to have both type A (hard-driving, individualistic, competitive) and type B (people-oriented, concerned with consensus, etc.) characteristics. John Harvey-Jones talks about the need for a more collaborative, creative and adaptive approach, Charles Mackay about a less autocratic consensus-orientation, Allen Shepard about the importance of people-awareness, Jean Denton of motivational skills. Penny Hughes believes that future business

leaders will need to be more fast-moving and flexible. Liam Strong considers not only that future business leaders will need to lead from "among rather than on top" but also will have to hold their own, with staff who are increasingly expert technically. In terms of approach to business, several people mentioned the growing importance of being good corporate citizens, and of community awareness. Consistently, in "Reinventing the CEO", the need for ethics was deemed most important for future chief executives, followed by creativity, enthusiasm and open-mindedness.

Inescapably, then, business leaders will continue to require the same clarity of vision, derived from a powerful intellect reducing a complex reality to the critical essentials; the same credible communication and interpersonal skills to articulate the vision compellingly and motivate people to action; the same character, sincerity, generosity and self-mastery to inspire trust, withstand the necessary loneliness of leadership and not fall victim to the "walk-on-water" syndrome; and the same high levels of motivation and physical energy to achieve the extraordinary. These qualities, combined with a self-critical, open, flexible and lifelong learning approach that draws on a track record of broad functional experience, early successful line management experience, international experience (increasingly) and the lessons to be learned from managing in diversity and adversity in fast-changing conditions, will continue to be what it takes to reach the top in the new millennium.

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