

How to Lead: chapter one

March 1, 2005

How to Lead: Introduction.

Leadership is too often shrouded in mystery. To become leaders we are urged to become a combination of Genghis Khan, Nelson Mandela, Machiavelli and Ghandi. A few people feel that they are already that good. The rest of us feel slightly small when measured against such giants.

The mystery deepens when you try to define what makes a good leader in practice. We all can recognise a good leader in our daily lives. But no leader seems to conform to a single template.

Some academics and consultants decided to solve the mystery of leadership. They had time on their hands: they were on safari. By way of a warm up exercise they decided to design the perfect predator. Each took responsibility for one element of the predator. The result was a beast with the legs of a cheetah, the jaws of a crocodile, the hide of a rhino, the neck of a giraffe, the ears of an elephant, the tail of a scorpion and the attitude of a hippo. The beast promptly collapsed under the weight of its own improbability.

Undeterred, they turned their attention to designing the perfect leader. Their perfect leader looked like this:

- Creative and disciplined
 - Visionary and detailed
 - Motivational and commanding
 - Directing and empowering
 - Ambitious and humble
 - Reliable and risk taking
 - Intuitive and logical
 - Intellectual and emotional
- Coaching and controlling.

This leader also collapsed under the weight of overwhelming improbability.

The good news is that we do not have to be perfect to be a leader. We have to fit the situation. The polar bear is the perfect predator in the arctic, but would be useless in Papua New Guinea. Winston Churchill had to endure what he called his “wilderness years” in peace time. He just happened to be perfect as a war time leader. The same leader enjoyed different outcomes in different situations.

This book is about becoming an effective leader, not the perfect leader.

In search of the pixie dust of leadership.

There has been a long search for the alchemy of leadership: we all want to find the elusive pixie dust that we can sprinkle onto base managers and turn them into glittering leaders.

We looked hard for this pixie dust ourselves. In our search we asked over 700 individuals what they saw as effective leadership at all levels of the organisation. We conducted 30 video interviews with CEO level individuals in the public, private and voluntary sectors in both small and large organisations. We also reviewed 25 years experience of working with over 50 of the world's best, and one or two of the world's worst, organisations to see what patterns of leadership emerged. We even worked with some traditional tribal groups in east and central Africa to see how they were led.

The bad news is that we found no pixie dust. Or if there is, they are hiding it very well.

But there is plenty of good news:

- Everyone can be a leader. The leaders we talked to came in all sorts of flavours and styles and all had different success formulas.
- You can load the dice in your favour. There are some things that all leaders do well. It does not guarantee success, but it does make it more likely.
- You can learn to be a leader. You do not have to be someone else: you do not have to become Napoleon. You simply have to be the best of who you are.

This book shows how you can acquire the consistent characteristics of effective leadership and how you can adapt it to your own style.

Unravelling the mysteries of leadership.

Leadership is inundated by small words with big meanings like “vision” and “values” and “integrity”. It is a subject which suffers from an extraordinary amount of bullshit. In our exploration of leadership with leaders the mysteries began to melt away. We asked, and found reassuringly practical answers for, some common questions about leadership:

- Can you learn to be a leader?
- What is this vision thing?
- Do values have any value in reality?
- How do leaders with apparent weaknesses succeed?
- Why do some great people fail as leaders?
- What do leaders look for in their followers?
- What makes a good leader?
- Is a leader just the person at the top?
- How do you handle conflict and crises?

What follows is not a theory of leadership. It is the collected wisdom of people who are leading at all levels in different types of organisation. The result is a book which can act as your coach to being an effective leader at any level of any organisation.

In search of any leadership.

We started our search with an easy question: what is leadership? We promptly got lost in a jungle of conflicting views expressed both forcibly and persuasively. Everyone recognises a good leader when they see one, but no one agrees on a common definition.

We found one dead end was the belief that leadership is related to seniority. Leadership is not about position: it is about what you do and how you behave. So it follows that:

- the person at the top of the organisation may be in a leadership position, but they may not be leading. They may be careful stewards of a legacy organisation.
- Leaders can exist at nearly all levels of the organisation.
- Leaders need followers: you may be smarter than Einstein, but if no one is following you, you can not be a leader.

At this point it made sense to start looking for the skills and behaviours that effective leaders have. We made a surprising discovery. Many leaders not only lack some basic management skills: they know they lack those skills. Being good at writing memos, giving presentations, accounting acumen, strategic insight or deep technical expertise is useful, but not essential. Most leaders rated intelligence as a low priority for leadership: either they were telling the truth or they were demonstrating the humility of great leaders.

By now we were lost in the leadership jungle. Skills seemed to be a dead end: styles of leadership could take us in nearly any direction.

So we looked more closely at behaviours of leaders, and suddenly a way forward opened up in front of us. We asked people what they expected from the leaders of their organisation. There was a clear consensus on the behaviours of good leadership. The key behaviours expected of a leader at the top of the organisation were:

- Ability to motivate others
- Vision
- Honesty and Integrity
- Decisiveness
- Ability to handle crises

It is worth reflecting for a moment on what is not in the list: management skills, reliability, intelligence, ambition, attention to detail, planning and organisation all failed to register. As this leadership journey unfolds we will explore what these behaviours really mean and what we can do to demonstrate those behaviours effectively.

Before pushing into the land of the leader, we stopped to ask whether these are the same behaviours expected of leaders at all levels. So we asked people at all levels of the organisation what they look for in emerging leaders at the start of their careers. Again, people look for certain behaviours. But the behaviours that are valued in emerging leaders are totally different from the behaviours expected in senior leaders:

- Adaptability
- Self confidence
- Proactivity

- Reliability
- Ambition

There is one glaring omission from the list above. Performance. It does not get a mention. Most of the senior leaders we talked to were very focussed on performance, although that meant totally different things for different organisations.

By now we were getting swamped with words and ideas about leadership. We needed a simple map. We boiled all the words and ideas down to a few simple principles which apply to leaders at all levels of the organisation. For the sake of alliteration and simplicity, we called them the 3.5 P's of leadership. Three of the Ps dropped out of our research readily. Performance is the odd one out. If we were being intellectually rigorous, it would have no place in our leadership framework, because only one of our leaders really focussed on performance and delivery as the keys to leadership. For the others, it was perhaps assumed that good performance would be an outcome of the other factors: it was a symptom, not a cause, of good leadership. For this reason, we can do no more than award it half a P in the leadership framework: **Positive, People Focus, Professionalism and half a point for Performance**

These words can mean more or less anything to anyone. So the next task was to create a more detailed picture of what lay behind these grand words and convert into something practical that all leaders can use in their daily lives.

Creating the leadership map.

Slowly, a map of the leadership journey started to unfold. There are some consistent expectations of leaders across all types of organisation. But the expectations of leadership change at different levels of the organisation. The rules of success and survival vary. This helps explain why people often find themselves over promoted. The rules they followed at one level do not work at the next level up of the organisation.

This poses a significant issue. Too much leadership work focuses on what happens at the top of an organisation. Our research shows that the rules which work at the top of the organisation are not relevant to someone setting out on the leadership journey. We realised it was no good mapping the destination: we had to map the journey to the destination as well.

Managing the transition from one level of leadership to another is always a challenge. Failure rates are high even at the highest level of the organisation. The career expectancy of a FTSE 100 CEO is now under five years. It pays to know how the rules of success and survival vary by level.

Eventually, we pieced together a map of what good leadership looks like at each level of the organisation.

Effective leadership behaviours.

Effective leadership	Emerging leaders	Leading in the Matrix	Leading from the top
People focus	Decentres self, manages up, supports others	Builds commitment, good influencer. Builds networks.	Forms, aligns, motivates a leadership team
Professional	Learns the business, learns leadership. Loyal. Reliable.	Master core skills, sees beyond own silo.	Honesty, integrity; role model for core values
Positive	Drive, ambition, self aware, adaptable. Finds solutions, not problems. Volunteers.	Embraces ambiguity as opportunity, not risk. Manages conflict well.	Communicates a clear vision; handles crises well; focus on must-win battles; decisive.

Much of what you can read in the table may seem obvious. But before reading on, try two exercises. In the first exercise, think of some people that you rate as effective leaders at different levels of your organisation, and see how well they display the characteristics above. There will certainly be some differences: as long as leaders are human there will be variation. But the chances are that they will show many of the characteristics above to a greater degree than their peers if they are good.

There is one catch in the leadership map. When making the transition from one level of leadership to another, the rules of the game do not change completely. You can not substitute one set of rules for another. Instead, the rules of success are additive: you have to do all the things you did at the previous level, and then add the new rules for the new level. The leadership hurdle does rise with each level of the organisation.

In practice, this means that the early years of the leadership career are vital: the habits formed then will not go away. Learn the wrong habits early on, and they become very difficult to kick.

Now try looking through the other end of the telescope at some less effective leaders in your organisation: reflect on why they are less effective. We found some consistent traps that leaders fall into at every level of the organisation. These are not problems of gross incompetence, although those problems do exist in some organisations. They are traps that decent managers easily fall into. The result is that they stay as managers and never emerge as leaders.

Ineffective leadership behaviours.

Ineffective leadership	Emerging leaders	Leading from the middle	Leading from the top
People focus	Egocentric; lives in rational world, no EQ or political awareness.	Expertise focus, not people focus; naïve about networks and politics	Hires weak clones; threatened by talent. Delegates poorly.
Professional	One of the lads or lasses.	Too political, loses trust. Leader in the locker room.	Rides the gravy train of status and entitlement
Positive	Can't do; problem focussed; delegates upwards	Retreats into comfort zone of authority, not responsibility	Lack of stretch for self or the organisation; manages a legacy

These descriptions of effective and ineffective leaders should come as no surprise. We needed to take one more step to create a useful map of the leadership journey. It is not enough to tell people that leaders are inspirational, or heroic, or charismatic. Most of us do not fill that mould and never will. You can not teach or learn charisma easily. More to the point, most of our leaders felt that charisma and heroism was exactly the wrong style of leadership. Good leaders do not pretend to know it all and they do not try to do everything themselves. Leadership, for them, is a team sport. They all know they have weaknesses: their teams balance their own strengths and weaknesses.

Instead of focussing on heroism and charisma, our leaders focussed on the practical skills which a leader needs to lead. We have identified over 25 practical skills which leaders need to lead. They are different from the technical skills of the job (book keeping, legal knowledge, cutting code): they are also different in quality from the way the managers learn the same or similar skills. They are skills which the leader has to start acquiring from the start of their career.

There is plenty of good news in this skills based approach to leadership. It blows away the mysterious guff about heroic leaders and reduces it to things that ordinary people can aspire to learn. Effective leaders do not even need to learn all the skills: all our leaders recognised that they have weaknesses and are still learning. By having the self confidence and self awareness to know their own weaknesses, they could build the right leadership team to help them and they could be open about still learning.

Finally, all our leaders were clear that they succeeded by building on their strengths. Everyone has weaknesses: building on weakness is not a recipe for success. We do not need to try to be someone else. We simply need to be the best of who we are. We need to build on strengths and work around our weaknesses.

This book is your guide to the leadership journey. It focuses on the many practical skills which helps distinguish effective from less effective leaders. It does not guarantee success, but it will load the dice in your favour.

Jo Owen