

Leadership

Leadership is about *who you are*. Management is about *what you do*. Sir Michael Bichard, a former Permanent Secretary, draws a clear distinction between managers and leaders:

Managers who control their organisations effectively may enable them to survive. But it is the leaders who create a sense of purpose and direction and who analyse, anticipate and inspire.

Strong leadership is therefore essential if your team is to be innovative, efficient and successful. And yet one of the minor mysteries of the modern world is why there are so few effective leaders – in both the public and private sectors – when there is so much advice available in so many different books and courses. They all say pretty much the same sort of thing which is that leaders:

- have a *remorseless* iron determination to make things happen;
- have an unshakeable inner conviction;
- constantly promote the same message;
- are different;
- have at least one weakness;
- set an example;
- keep things simple;
- are a little theatrical;
- are *committed* to their team;
- give people the freedom to take their own decisions
- liberate;
- encourage;
- support;
- develop people and teams;
- are fair;
- are sensitive to people's feelings;
- are *honest*
- are physically strong, and
- take risks.

Simple, eh? And of course many civil servants have a good number of the above attributes. But my own observation, for what it is worth, is that too few senior civil servants are sufficiently remorseless, committed, and honest. Let me explain what I mean.

Remorselessness

The first and most important characteristic of a leader is remorselessness, which takes two forms.

First, leaders feel no remorse when they make mistakes, or when some innovation fails to work. They recognise that they are dealing with humans, not machines, and human behaviour is highly unpredictable. Remorse and guilt are understandable, but quite unnecessary, even if something does not work in the way you expected.

Second, leaders are remorseless (in the sense of relentless) because they know that every improvement will take two or three times as long as they expect it to. But they don't let this stop them. Instead, they keep plugging away and eventually they and their teams achieve levels of performance that others can only dream of.

Commitment

Different situations call for different styles of leadership. Sometimes decisions need to be made very quickly and obeyed without question. But leaders nowadays almost always need the consent of those that they lead. Management consultants Kouzes and Posner describe leadership as 'a reciprocal relationship between those who choose to lead and those who decide to follow,' Modern leaders therefore need to be a cross between an old-fashioned captain of a ship and someone who is running for office. It follows that newly appointed leaders should go out of their way to get themselves elected – i.e. respected by their teams – in the first few days after their appointment. This simple fact does not seem to be understood by many colleagues.

If you are to be elected leader then you must commit to the team, with all its strengths and weaknesses. This is particularly important in the civil service if only because you are unlikely to be around long enough to replace them. And the civil service is anyway so large that, by definition, it has to employ a cross-section of the population. Of course you do not need put up with mediocrity or laziness. But you cannot insist on surrounding yourself with energetic geniuses. Your task is to get the best out of those who work for you, without forever wishing yourself somewhere else.

How do you show your commitment? You should:

- P** be very visible;
- P** set a good example, including by complying with rules and standards that have been set for your team;
- P** champion the team e.g. by defending them against unfair criticism, but also
- P** respond to fair criticism, whether of you or your team, in particular by putting matters right and by ensuring that the problem does not recur.

This all seems very obvious, but a Grade 7 friend of mine told me that three weeks passed before his newly appointed Grade 5 boss got round to meeting him, and he had yet to meet his Grade 3 after six months in the job. So some colleagues still have

something to learn about visibility, commitment and leadership.

Honesty

According to Lucy Kellaway in the *Financial Times*, a good leader knows exactly when to be straight, when to be economical with the truth, when to lay it on with a trowel, and when to dissemble. This is absolutely right, but most of us spend too much time dissembling and too little time being honest with our staff. In particular, we have to be honest in making it clear to staff that they are employed for no other reason than to help the leader achieve his or her objectives. However much they like working together, the team must be directed to achieving a common goal. Everyone is then much better directed and motivated. Those who skirt round this fundamental truth simply waste time and create confused expectations.

Effective leaders also give clear and honest feedback to their staff – not all the time, but frequently enough to be effective. Any sustained failure to give honest feedback to colleagues – and of course we have all failed to some extent, and regretted it – can only end in disappointment, confusion and demoralisation. Honest appraisal is also a necessary companion to empowerment. Once the manager has defined the job that is to be done, he or she should aim to keep out of the way and let his or her staff do what is expected of them. But there must be regular informal and formal appraisal to ensure that the work stays on track.

The formal appraisal system is no doubt a necessary evil but it must be supplemented by informal appraisal, perhaps along the lines summarised in the book *The One Minute Manager*. This suggests that managers should give immediate feedback whenever they see good or bad work. Unfortunately too many managers give immediate feedback which is either always positive (and therefore dishonest) or always negative (which is debilitating). Colleagues quickly learn to appreciate the honesty of the manager who gives both sorts of feedback.

Formal appraisal is delivered within a structured system over which individual managers have only limited control. But it is worth making three important points.

First, the formal annual appraisal is essentially one-way communication. The process might begin with self-appraisal (although I have my doubts about the effectiveness of this approach) but it is essentially an opportunity for the appraiser to be honest about how the other person has appeared to them over the preceding period. The person being appraised might well feel that the appraiser is wrong, but that should lead to improved communication and other action in the next reporting period. There can be no question of the appraisal being 'agreed' by the person being appraised, or subject to any form of appeal.

It is sensible, however, to show draft appraisals to the person on whom you are reporting, for you might well have forgotten some achievement, or you might have expressed something in an upsetting way. But the report should nevertheless remain your honest assessment of the other person, in comparison to other civil servants.

Second, appraisals should lead to action, whether by way of improved communication between manager and managed, or changes to objectives and

expectations, or further training and development.

Third, it is better if appraisals are supplemented by 'upward feedback' or even '360 degree feedback'. There are several good systems which facilitate these processes but it must be stressed that they are not the same as 'upward appraisal'. I certainly want to hear from my staff what messages I am communicating to them e.g. through my behaviour. But it is not for them to tell me whether I am doing a good job.

So is that it? Well not quite. Leaders also have certain duties, and the three most important are that they must:

P set the boundaries;

P set the culture, within which their team will operate,

P empower their staff.

Leaders therefore need to carry out a difficult balancing act. On the one hand they need to be obsessive about setting boundaries and establishing the right culture. On the other hand, they need to empower and support. Those who get it right can usually then stand back and watch their team achieve surprising results. Further detail follows . . .

Setting Boundaries

It is vitally important that leaders should establish the ethical, financial, legal and other boundaries within which their colleagues should work. Problems (and sometimes severe problems) arise when these are not explicit or, even worse, when senior managers appear not to respect those boundaries. It is particularly important that civil servants should operate within the ethical, financial and legal boundaries laid down by Parliament and it is odd, to say the least, that it is difficult to find a written statement of these. I hope that other parts of this book go some way to defining the ethical etc. boundaries of which I am aware. It follows that I require everyone who works with me to respect these boundaries and to require all their staff to do the same.

Many boundaries are cultural, rather than ethical, in the sense that leaders are responsible for establishing the parameters within which staff deal with each other, with customers, with work pressures and so on. There is more on this below, but it is worth noting that some staff will constantly test your boundaries and force your intervention when the boundaries are likely to be breached. They will accuse you of micro-management. Other staff will respect your boundaries, and get on with their jobs with very little intervention from yourself. But they may as a result worry that you are not interested in them or their work area. It is therefore important that you explain your approach, and reassure those who think you have taken empowerment just a little too far.

Establishing the Culture

Leaders set the tone of the organisation – even in small but important ways. For

instance, I hope that any visitor to my office will find that we are open, informal and hospitable. We feel that it makes a real difference if we are friendly and polite to each other, and offer refreshments and other courtesies to visitors. We in particular welcome the opportunity to talk about our work, and our approach to our work, and welcome visits from colleagues from Embassies, from industrialists, from students and from teachers.

I also expect everyone to recognise their responsibility for the safety, health and well-being of themselves and all their colleagues. We take the alarm bells seriously, even if we suspect that they are a false alarm. We take seriously all reports of sexual harassment, racial or sexual discrimination, or bullying. We give unquestioning support to colleagues who express concern about safety, harassment or discrimination. Above all, we do not ask colleagues to work so hard that they become stressed or over-tired. This is not only unethical, but it leads to mistakes and misjudgements – which in turn create more pressure.

Next, I encourage everyone to be customer-focused, where our customers are defined as the immediate beneficiaries of particular pieces of work. If you are preparing a briefing, your customer is the person who will use it. If you are organising a meeting, your customers will be those who attend the meeting. Our customers should be the sole and decisive judge of the quality of our work. The test is not whether we think that our work meets the requirements of the customer, but whether the customer is satisfied.

This implies measurement. You cannot tell whether your customer is satisfied unless you have asked him or her in a structured way. It should become second nature that your plans and your day-to-day work are driven by the expressed needs of your customers.

Measurement in turn drives continuous improvement. You and your team should constantly be looking out for ways – usually quite small in themselves – in which you could improve the satisfaction of the customer, or do the job more efficiently or effectively. The cumulative effort of many small improvements can be very noticeable indeed. Conversely, a cumulative failure to improve will eventually and inevitably lead to your customers feeling dissatisfied with the service that you are providing. It follows that imitation is a virtue. If you hear of a good idea, or see something working well, you should not hesitate to copy it so as to improve the service that you are providing to your customers. And if you run out of ideas for improvements, you should benchmark your team against another team or organisation. You will probably be surprised at what you find.

Continuous improvement in turn requires a no fault culture. We assume that everyone is trying to do a good job, within the limits of their skills, training and experience. Management gurus often say that ‘customers’ complaints are jewels to be treasured’. This is a bit over the top for most of us, but it is certainly true that complaints should never be ignored, and a single complaint often represents the tip of an iceberg of unvoiced dissatisfaction. Quality conscious organisations are therefore usually obsessive about investigating and resolving customer complaints, whether from internal or external customers. And complaints should never be used as a stick with which to beat your staff or other colleagues. If mistakes are made, or if quality standards are not met, then the person involved should be given clearer instructions or better training, or

attention must be given to the process that they were carrying out, or they may not be in an appropriate job. (This judgement should not be arrived at lightly, but neither should it be ducked. If necessary, the person must be moved to a job that they can do.)

Empowerment

Empowerment is often confused with delegation. Delegation often means no more than that the delegate is simply told what to do and how to do it. Empowerment is better because it allows the colleague to choose how best to achieve his or her objectives and targets. Leaders don't delegate. They empower.

But note that empowerment is not a close relation of anarchy. People work to clearly specified objectives and targets, which they may not vary without consulting their boss and/or customer. Also, as noted above, they must work within other constraints laid down by the manager, including appropriate professional standards, standard procedures, quality standards and financial constraints. You should help them gain experience by empowering them, monitoring their performance and acting to relax the constraints as soon as you can.

In particular, submissions, draft letters etc. should be prepared by the person, however junior, best equipped to prepare a first draft. If the issue is not novel or contentious, and the person is appropriately experienced and trained, then there should be no need for the work to be countersigned by anyone else. Two heads are however better than one if an issue is novel or contentious. A senior colleague who countersigns work in these circumstances should concentrate on the substance of the work, and the way it will appear to Ministers or the recipients of letters etc. They should pay relatively little attention to the detail, style or grammar of the work.

Work should also be countersigned if the action officer is being trained, or gaining experience. It is helpful in these circumstances if the countersigning officer pays attention both to the substance of the work and to the detail, style and grammar. The objective of this intervention should, however, be to train the colleague so that countersignature is in due course not necessary.

Achieving Change

One other task often falls to leaders: the planning and implementation of significant change. It is then important to remember *the 5 Cs* – the five elements of any organisation, none of which can be changed without simultaneously causing change in the others:

- capacity, i.e. resources, and in particular staff numbers;
- capability (or competence), i.e. staff skills, training, experience and motivation;
- communications, including not only communications whilst the change programme is being implemented, but also new ways of communicating once the changes have

been implemented;

- culture, new relationships, attitudes to innovation, reward structures etc.;
- constitution, i.e. organisational structure, reporting lines etc.

Any change process therefore needs to consider the inter-relationship between these five elements, and what all of them – not just one of them – will look like at the end of the process. For instance, downsizing or de-layering must be accompanied by changes in the other elements, including improved training, accepting more errors, improved team-working and improved rewards. A failure to tackle these issues will mean that the slimmed-down organisation will perform markedly less well and will probably then return to its former size when it is forced to recruit again to improve its performance.

It follows that it is very difficult to manage change successfully, which is why so many reform and change programmes are unsuccessful. Indeed, there is much to be said for opting instead for continuous improvement of existing processes and structures, if Ministers will be patient enough.