

Could you be one of tomorrow's leaders?

Leaders are made and most make themselves, but what behaviour should a future leader exhibit?
Christopher Barrat explains

Although winning the lottery and becoming a great leader may both seem unattainable, there is a crucial difference between them. If you buy a few lottery tickets then you do shorten the odds but they are still dramatically bad. If you practise leadership skills in the right way, and do them consistently, then your chance of becoming the leader of the future is not only improved - it becomes a certainty.

The good news is that having fun is going to be one of them.

But first you have to understand the future, and then the requirements of leadership will become apparent.

Management and leadership have changed in step with recent economic and social developments. And the speed of change has caused markets to become unstable. Organisational structures have moved from more traditional autocracies - with central command and control - through the re-engineering nightmare of bureaucracies, to a more random situation - charmingly titled by business writer and social philosopher Charles Handy as adhocracies.

This sets the context for the underlying principle of future leadership. It will be a leadership style that is less about defining your borders and more about integration; it will be less about what you control and more about what you shape.

Does this, therefore, pave the way for a group of leaders who fall somewhere between a diplomat and a spin doctor? That would be a depressing thought, and is fortunately not the case. Spin alone will not get the production line started and more than diplomacy is required during negotiations. There are specific types of behaviour; therefore, that need to be put in

place to make you a leader of the future, and by doing so will show that great leaders can be made, not simply born.

Leaders' behaviour

Leaders are leaders because they behave in a certain way. Even if you set up a company that bears your family name, it may not be enough to keep you as the leader - Sir Ken Morrison, the chairman of retailer Morrisons, is realising this following his company's takeover of Safeway. So if it is behaviour and not birthright that makes the Winston Churchills of this world, who controls your conduct?

There is evidence to show that your societal values and personal motivation drive your behaviour, and that these can be changed. In effect, you can make yourself a leader. Then the only problem remaining is to work out what types of behaviour you will need to display, and how to focus them.

Personal power

Even if things change, with the right behaviour you can still emerge as a leader. This view is backed by research carried out by Jo Meehan, senior lecturer in supply chain management at Liverpool John Moores University. She has been examining the role of personal power - or the way you behave - in negotiations. Her findings appear to show, first, that there is such a phenomenon as personal power, and second, that it has an independent effect. In other words, whatever the organisational or market landscape you are in, the effective use of personal power will have a significant effect in negotiations - and skilled negotiators will always find themselves in positions of leadership.

The behaviours fall into four main headings. The first is to have an underlying focus that looks to the future, a way of thinking about what could be, rather than what you have; paint pictures for people about how systems, suppliers and situations could develop to make them better.

Almost by definition this will also encompass a degree of opportunism and optimism. Listen carefully to the language you use and to the way you analyse issues. Simply re-branding every problem as a challenge won't solve it. However, if you start adjusting your viewpoint away from being judgmental for today and more about being creative for tomorrow, it can significantly improve your leadership potential.

Second, and particularly in the area of purchasing, there needs to be a desire to actually make things happen. Simply holding visionary think-ins will not get you far. Future leaders need to demonstrate the determination to see something through. Find a project and, just for once, have a go at crossing every t and dotting every i.

This links to the concept of building up sweat equity, which all good leaders have in their savings banks. This is the credibility you gain from proving you can actually roll up your sleeves and deliver. Do too much of it and you are a stifling manager; do too little and you are in an ivory tower. The skill is to set yourself at least a couple of projects in the next year where you demonstrably deliver the detail.

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The final two behaviours might be termed the salt and sugar of leadership. In the right combination and balance you have an isotonic drink, which can refresh and revitalise the people around you and set you up as their natural leader. Too much of either and you end up with something that, sometimes literally, makes you sick.

The salt is to make sure that, from time to time, you are truly fearsome. There need to be moments when the people around you see your passion. One of the famous tests of emotional intelligence is whether you can be angry with purpose, and on purpose.

Future leaders need to instill in people the confidence that they will have a strong person to stand up for them and lead them. They will only feel this if they have seen you take a stand and drive hard against an opponent. The leaders of the future will not be scared of using their emotions within the paradox of a controlled explosion.

The sugar is a positive message: have fun. It may be the key to effective leadership in the future. There is no doubt that social pressure will continue to mount, with higher expectations for both sexes in work and at home. People will have to accept that they may not find a real balance between work and home, so they will have to find a blend that is workable.

In addition, it is now clear that automation doesn't give us all more leisure; it means that fewer people are employed and those who do have jobs find themselves working at the limits of capacity. In these circumstances, being the generator of a fun, relaxed atmosphere will make you the leader of choice.

Leadership blend

The crucial issue is that having fun is in addition to the other characteristics. The leaders of the future will realise how it is possible to blend these elements together, and more critically, how to do this on a day-to-day basis. The future leader will not save up for the one fun weekend of the year; the one bawling-out review; the one project nit-pickingly delivered or the tri-annual visioning session.

The person who can do all of these things all of the time, in tiny pieces of behaviour, will undoubtedly be the leader of the future.

And it could be you.

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