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# What Really Matters in Leadership Success

Ian Florance, CEO TODAY

Organisations often handle leadership in a commonsense way. They identify potential leaders via performance appraisal, informal talent-spotting, fast-track recruitment, then train them in specific leadership skills. Existing leaders are supported by mentoring and coaching: two years ago the British Psychological Society estimated UK organisations spend about £1 billion on senior development.

Yet, corporate leaders are increasingly blamed for corporate scandals, organisational underperformance and perceived greed. According to the Hay Group, employee disengagement - often caused by bad management - costs UK industry £340 billion per annum.

The commonsense approach assumes that certain people are naturally better leaders than others, but that you can teach certain leadership skills. Do good leaders share certain qualities? Research has not yet uncovered them.

Leadership models abound. Good leadership might be:

- what you do, not who you are;
- different depending on the person, the situation, the organisation, the sector and the culture;
- like being a charismatic film star or sporting icon;
- what you are born with or what you are taught to be.

Leadership may be important but there seems little agreement about what it is.

We talked to three cutting-edge thinkers from very different backgrounds about the topic. Do any common themes develop from new thinking about what leaders do and are?



Justin Hughes

Justin Hughes was deputy team leader of the Red Arrows and RAF fighter pilot. He then set up Mission Excellence ([www.missionexcellence.com](http://www.missionexcellence.com)) to provide organisational performance solutions. He is a highly regarded business consultant and speaker.

## In the corporate world, potential leaders are identified because they excel in a technical area and are then taught leadership skills

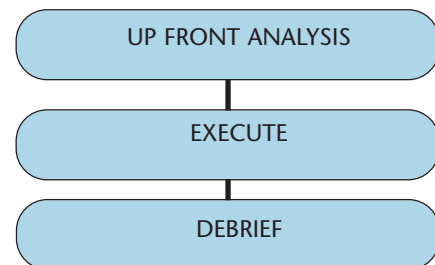
Mr Hughes says: "I do not have a specific model of leadership, a core set of competences or one tool I can use to identify it." Instead, he shows how military experience can illuminate the identification, development and practice of leadership. "In the corporate world, potential leaders are identified because they excel in a technical area and are then taught leadership skills. Sometimes it is assumed functional excellence implies leadership

effectiveness so new leaders are left to sink or swim.

The RAF provides a contrast. If you join you probably want to fly a plane. But you have to wait six months to get to that point: for the first six months you are immersed in issues of brand, leadership and followership. This is even truer in the Red Arrows. We assume the 35-40 applicants a year can fly. The week-long selection process focuses on informal judgment of applicants' behavioural skills. Although the skill bar is high, the team prefers someone who is only just there but with excellent behavioural ability rather than vice versa. In my view organisational leadership development is the wrong way round: behavioural skills should come first."

He emphasises the advantages of his approach: "People see the military as inflexible: as having a set hierarchy, a way of doing things. Of course you learn certain things "by the book" so you can free up your brain to make crucial judgements. But if you are flying a night mission over Kosovo, there is no time for a request to go up the chain of command and the decision to come back down. Everyone is involved in leadership. Mission decision-making is fluid and flexible."

Mr Hughes uses the simple three-stage process used to plan and execute a military mission to show how corporate leadership can be reimaged.



"In military operations, leadership has little to do with seniority. Operational teams are complex matrix structures. Once goals are set you decide who is best placed to fulfil each role. Since everyone has a grounding in leadership, anyone can take up that role. The key is to decide who is best to lead the project, to push decision making as far down the chain as it will go and then to support the people you have delegated to. If you do that right it solves the disengagement problem."

**To my mind, a lot of business thinkers and the business schools have taken the passion out of leadership by overcomplicating it**

"A mission without debriefing is unfinished. Debriefing is a constantly iterated cycle of 360-feedback and performance appraisal. Just as in execution, debriefing sidelines seniority. Leaders' performance is critiqued and praised so they in turn learn. How leaders react to this - defensively or openly - is critical to the loyalty and motivation of their team. So debriefing, carried out in this way, sites leaders within the team: not as someone who has all the answers but as someone learning, improving and responding to upward insights. It pulls together everything: leadership; motivation; engagement and an upward performance trajectory."

"To my mind, a lot of business thinkers and the business schools have taken the passion out of leadership by overcomplicating it. Leadership is underpinned by process but, in the end, it is about behaviour. The sort of approach followed in the RAF provides an excellent model for corporate businesses to follow."



**Professor Peter Robertson**

Professor Peter Robertson trained as a doctor and a psychiatrist before becoming a KPMG consultant. He is the founder of Human Insight ([www.human-insight.com](http://www.human-insight.com)). Drawing on evolution and chaos theory and cybernetics he has developed business ecology, an approach to organisational change which has profound implications for leadership.

"An organisation is a complex system like any natural eco-system, a forest, a prairie or an ant-hill. Leadership has to start from that understanding."

When asked what leaders do, he answers with great intellectual passion: "They create emergence by consistency. I know that sounds complicated but if you have children - in fact if you have been a child, which most of us have! - you will understand it. Parents cannot control how children develop. They can create an environment within which children feel safe, can explore and learn and surprise us. Parents know that the key to this is being consistent. If parents are inconsistent children get fretful, anxious, angry, scared. So, leaders are organisational parents."

Is consistency about doing the same thing repeatedly? "No. Consistent leaders create a recognisable pattern in

a chaotic environment; something people can predict and which ensures they have a sense of security. Doing the same thing repeatedly is inhuman: it is not the characteristic of a living system."

Professor Robertson insists that values are a central leadership issue despite the tokenistic way they have been used.

"Consistency is the mother of values. Values emerge out of the organisation through consistent behaviour. You cannot command customer orientation; you can create the conditions within which it will emerge."

**Consistent leaders create a recognisable pattern in a chaotic environment**

The content of the values a leader enacts is crucial. They can be good or bad: "This is not an ethical judgement, but everything a leader does must create an environment within which people can self-organise and develop. If leaders are permanently inconsistent they create fear. People are genetically designed to fear inconsistency more than danger. Fear creates defensive behaviour and routines, procedures, norms all leading to all kinds of bureaucracy. Values can only emerge from living systems and so it happens that inconsistency kills all values.

"Big bureaucracies are death to a company. Dead values create dead companies and cause the problem they seek to solve. They will actually make good people bad. Enron, in my view, was not an exception. It is the rule if leaders lead badly. And that means giving up the idea that you can control a complex organisation and how it develops, any more than you can control what interests your child will

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have. You have to create conditions in which these interests will emerge. And you have to consistently fight the growth of self-seeking bureaucracy.”

Professor Robertson has a final point: “Everyone is not a natural leader. All of us cannot be consistent, have values, feel comfortable in complex, chaotic situations and give up the illusion of control. However, understanding that an organisation is a complex living system is the first step to effective leading.”



**Dr Ken Ideus**

Dr Ken Ideus worked in the oil industry for years (his last corporate role was that of joint head of individual and leadership development for BP Group). He is a high level business coach and founder of Delta Partnership ([www.delta-partnership.com](http://www.delta-partnership.com)). Dr Ideus runs “The Leader’s Voice” a unique event which helps to develop both how and what leaders communicate.

“My model of leadership integrates things that people acquire - skills and competencies - and things people develop: values and attributes. My view

of development draws on development psychology. Various streams of a person - aspects as varied as the cognitive, emotional, psychological, and moral - develop through a series of stages and tasks.

Successful leaders:

- aspire to leadership yet maintain humility;
- find mastery in a few areas but value many;
- have a core set of beliefs but embrace the many beliefs of others;
- have clear views and yet are open to the views of others;
- can set a specific direction but have the ability to adapt and adopt;
- have a deep moral structure but hesitate to judge others (as bad or good) too quickly;
- have a wide repertoire of behaviours all of which are authentic;
- speak with their own voice even if representing the position of others;
- embrace paradox with certainty of purpose.

By contrast, failing leaders assume they are the means of success rather than being part of it. The failure results from:

- not using talent and abilities around them;
- directly or indirectly discouraging bad news;
- behaving inconsistently with what they say and with espoused values.”

When asked whether leaders both develop and learn, Dr Ideus responded: “Natural leadership shows up throughout life. People can and do develop into leaders that others will choose to follow. Leadership “competencies” - things that effective leaders do - can be learned. So, true development work must parallel skill

or competence acquisition. The result of addressing both is integrity and authenticity.”

Dr Ideus responded to the question: “How do you identify people who are going to make a success of the job?”, with: “Looking for the best and the brightest is a good predictor of management, not of leadership success. We should be identifying people who seek development opportunities and grow from them: people who have the ability and desire to learn about self, values and our mental models of the world.”

Dr Ideus believes coaching has an important role in helping leaders find authenticity but views it in a wider context. “Even effective coaching may prevent leaders from creating a development context in the organisation. This can externalise the development process to third parties. The coaching and mentoring industry must consciously work to build that capability into client organisations as part of the coaching or mentoring process. This is part of the leaders role - to create a development culture within the organisation.”

**Are there any common themes?**

Are there any common themes developing from these three very different viewpoints? Yes, I think certain agreements begin to emerge.

- Leadership involves certain competences and skills which can be learnt but the personal, what have often been called dismissively “soft skills” are a huge element in leadership success.
- Values and vision are not bullet points to be hung in reception; they are genuine beliefs that leaders must articulate and act on if other people are to, in turn, act on them.

- “Show, do not tell”: the old adage is nowhere more true than in leadership. Encouraging customer orientation is about behaviour, not rules.
- Consistency is essential. This means behaviour being informed by a set of beliefs which can be recognised by others.
- Leaders lead from within, not from above. Control is, to some extent, impossible. So is being above criticism. Indeed joining in with the cycle of performance feedback is a crucial element in leader behaviour.
- Process underlies this: how you do things is as important as what you do. All three thinkers seem to view

organisations less like a mechanism and more like an ecology or community in which both human behaviour and living processes drive direction. Conveying instructions or flicking a button will not result in the intended effects.

Perhaps leadership is more complex and exciting than we ever thought! ■

**About the Author**

**Ian Florance works with a number of organisations, offering experience and expertise in business management, marketing, publishing, public relations, communications and**

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**Mr Florance was publishers’ representative on the BPS (British Psychology Society) Test Standards Committee, a member of European working parties on testing, and secretary and past president of the European Test Publishers Group. He is company secretary of the Business Test Publishers Association.**

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