

How to Lead from the Front

How to lead from the front sounds rather as if I am giving you suggestions on how to lead troops into battle. Yet doing business in the modern world is rather like going into battle. There are many uncertainties – weather could be as much an uncertainty for a battle as it could be for business (ask any haulier trying to get goods across the Channel when we have gales). In battle there are things you can predict, such as the number of enemy troops or enemy strategy, and so it is in business: market research should help predict the development of new products and their acceptance.

Then there is always the totally unpredictable – the Trojan horse weapon or in modern day language: September 11th. What you constantly have most control over however, is your troops. When you lead from the front, how confident are you that your troops will follow you to the death rather than turning tail and running?

Defining leadership

Norman Schwarzkopf, to continue my military theme, gives us a useful definition of leadership in this context:

“The challenge of leadership is to get people, willingly, to do more than they would, to rise above the norm, to perform at their higher level of potential”

The key word here is ‘willingly’. If you are leading from the front you have no possibility to wield a big stick from behind to threaten your followers into action.

I was talking recently about this at a seminar when one delegate told me of her previous manager, who was always getting her, in the nicest possible way, to go beyond her comfort zone with the result that her performance and self-confidence improved immeasurably. Sadly, he died suddenly at a young age, and she was asked to speak at his funeral service. She said that one of her greatest fears was speaking in public, ‘yet even in death he managed to get me to go beyond where I would normally go.’ This is a wonderful example of leading from the front so that others willingly rise above their norm.

Know your values

Leading from the front requires first and foremost that you know and are comfortable with yourself. By this, I mean knowing what your values are, what drives your

behaviour, what your personality is, what your strengths are and your limitations. As a start, you may like to do this exercise with a partner or a group:

Brainstorm as long a list as you can of values (things like ‘honesty’, ‘friendship’, ‘health’, ‘achievement’). Then individually, review the list and pick the 10 that are the most important to you. Then reduce that to 5, then to 3. If you can reduce it down to the most important value in your life, then you are on the way to discovering what drives you more than anything else to behave and react the way you do.

If you are doing this as a group, you will quickly notice that probably everybody’s prime value is different. Dig deeper and you will gain the knowledge that even when you have values in common, other people understand different things from it. For example, achievement for you might be to rise to senior management where you have the opportunity to influence the total strategy for the company. Achievement for someone else might be to become the company’s best salesperson, and receive the recognition and rewards that go with that. Achievement for a third person might be to regain full fitness after an illness or accident.

A leader understands these fundamental differences and does not judge people by his or her own values. Further to this, a leader actively spends time finding out what makes his or her people tick. Usually this comes out as an intense curiosity about others and a myriad of questions.

What being a leader means

Being a leader means having a mindset about people and facing challenges. Perhaps I can best explain this through comments from someone I met recently who has had a meteoric rise in healthcare. He runs an impressive ‘battleship’ and inspires loyalty from his people. Here are some of the things he said:

1. **‘I failed 2 sets of professional exams, but I certainly learnt from it’.** A leader sees a failure as an opportunity to learn, and a leader is always learning. He or she never rests on their laurels believing they know it all.

2. **'I have fantastic people working for me'**. I would suspect that most of them are ordinary people who have been given the opportunities to shine at doing what they do best and therefore do their jobs extraordinarily well. Leaders put round pegs in round holes. They know how to build on people's strengths rather than keep trying to fix people's weaknesses.
 3. **'I'll put you in contact with xxxxx who runs the training programme and he is the one who will make the decision'**. His staff have been empowered to take responsibility for their own work and to take decisions. However, remember that empowering someone to do something does not mean abdication. Like teaching a child to swim, a leader will know when to let go and how much to let go. He or she will know that progress will be different for each individual and will sense the needs of each. The leader also places a great deal of trust that his or her people will make the right decision. Good leadership requires two-way trust, but the best way for your people to trust you, is for you to trust them in the first place.
 4. **'It wouldn't be right for me to use my position to influence a decision'**. Leaders show high integrity and their values are important to them. They know that they are important role models for their people, and inconsistencies will be seen and copied.
 5. **'I expect people to make mistakes as they will learn from them. What I do not expect is for people to make the same mistake twice'**. Leaders develop a 'no blame' culture and catch people if they fall. However, they also have high expectations of them, that they will learn and not repeat mistakes. Leaders know that if they only expect lowly things from their people, it will stunt their growth.
 6. **'I have had to part company with some people when they have no longer fitted in with the organisational needs. It's especially difficult when they have become good friends. Luckily I have managed to stay friends with them all'**. Leaders recognise when they have to take painful decisions, and they have the courage to follow them through. What is remarkable is that leaders can weed out incompetence in such a way that the people involved realise that it is the right way forward and respect the leader for it.
 7. **'I'll start my new position in January, but I'll still spend one day a week here to begin with. No doubt they will soon wonder what on earth I am doing here as they don't really need me'**. A leader cultivates others to follow in his or her footsteps. They don't perceive it as a threat if others aspire to their job – only an opportunity to move on and do something new.
 8. **'This is xxxxxxx. He is the real genius behind all our documentation'**. A leader constantly praises and rewards his or her people and never takes credit if credit is due elsewhere. However, he or she will take responsibility if things go wrong.
 9. **'After I finished the review, and put forward the recommendations on the way forward, I was seen as the most appropriate person to put them into practice. So I was asked to set up this department to implement the changes'**. A leader has vision to see how an organisation can improve and go places. They pursue their goals with a passion that followers find infectious. A passenger is only likely to accept a lift from you in your car if they perceive a need to get to the same ultimate destination. It's difficult to take a passenger with you if you intend to drive around in circles and go nowhere. A leader is also prepared to take risks, knowing that without risk progress would be much slower.
 10. **'This is xxxxx. He's been my coach ever since I came into this job. He's really helped me learn about myself, and that's so important'**. Knowing yourself and self-leadership is a pre-requisite for leading others. Humility and not seeing yourself as being above certain tasks will earn respect from others, as well as not expecting others to have coaches or mentors if you are not prepared to be coached yourself.
 11. **'Thank you so much for coming to see me. I really appreciated your visit'**. Hang on a minute – I went to see him to enlist his help – not the other way round! A leader has the ability to make every person around him or her feel that they are very special. They do that by listening, appreciating the input of others, caring for the person and not just the job that the person is doing, and knowing that everyone from the cleaners to the Chief Executive has a pivotal role in making the battleship glide silently and effortlessly towards victory.
- It was easy to see why this man was going places. Virtually every sentence provided clues as to why he was so successful and earned such loyalty from his people.
- The big question that perhaps you are asking yourselves is 'Can I learn to be a leader like that?'

Can I learn to be a leader?

Everyone has leadership potential, but very few of us ever reach our full potential. Yes, we can all become better leaders, but like every skill, it requires practice and a willingness to learn.

I recently had the pleasure of running seminars on leadership for pupils of all ages in schools around the country. In one small primary school, I put all the pupils into groups covering a mixture of age ranges from 4 to 10 years of age and asked them to write down for me what they had learned about leadership that morning.

One group wrote:

'It doesn't matter what size you are and it's not about being bossy, just look in your heart and you'll find what you need to care, love, share and be friends. You can all do something and have different things that you are good at. Now put all this together and what are you now? A leader!'

It's very good advice, and gives every one of us a starting point on how to lead from the front.

This article was written by Sally, Associate Trainer to MyTrainingExpert. If you would like to know more about Sally please contact our team of Learning professionals.