

Why Would Anyone Want to be a Leader?

There's a great deal of kudos attached to being a leader whether it is a leader in business, the head of a project team or the captain of a sports team. It has been that leadership is the most studied and least understood of all the social sciences, but despite this, being the leader is still something that many continue to aspire to. It defines so much of our view of the world in which we live, and when we speak about a leader, it says much about both the person we are talking about and ourselves. We look for different qualities, we look for how they behave, we make a judgement about how we feel about them, and in doing so we are subconsciously making a statement about what we expect from a leader. Some years ago, there was some research carried out which analysed all the previous research on leadership qualities. The finding was that there were 176 different qualities expected of leaders! So leaders are expected to be some form of "super being", on the one hand capable of being empathetic and engaging, and the next decisive and ruthless. If that is the case, few (if indeed any) of us would qualify, and yet most of us I suspect still aspire (and some crave) to reach the top.

Why? Well I believe partly because it is hardwired into our DNA (our survival instinct is such that we subconsciously believe that the best person to ensure our survival is ourselves) and partly because of the way society rewards leaders (though we are very quick to forget the punishment society also dishes out!). Society fetes leaders from an early age. The captain of the school sports team is singled out by teachers as a good role model, the school report makes mention of it, sports team members are awarded school colours and captain's names are often inscribed on boards around schools to be revered for generations to come. Being the captain of a school sports team is a plus on a University entrance or job application form, and yet I contend that very few people actually look deeper into the title than that. How many interview panels have asked 'what qualities did you bring to the team as the captain?' let alone 'as captain, what did you learn about your ability to lead others, and how could you use that learning when you join us?'

And so it goes on as we progress through life. Success is too often measured by promotion not by other criteria. How often have you heard the conversation that goes:

"You are so good at what you do we are going to reward you by leaving you where you are! To reward you therefore we will pay you as much as you would have been paid if we had promoted you to team leader."

Instead people are rewarded by promotion often into roles for which they are unsuited, and often against their instinctive reaction to the promotion. Lack of promotion is often seen as a failure.

And when we are in a leadership position, society judges us not by the application of those 176 qualities, but by one adjective "**strong**". What a travesty of justice. Instead of using "effective" or "appropriate" as adjectives to describe the leadership that is needed, social commentators reach for "strong" as though without strong leadership, we are doomed to failure. Society builds leaders up on the basis of one adjective and then seems to take great delight in pulling them down. The way that the England team (and Captain Strauss' field placing decisions) were pilloried after the Headingley defeat was in stark contrast to the euphoria after the Lords victory and much of the blame was heaped on Strauss despite the fact that the bowlers there were painfully inadequate. Strauss as Captain had to shoulder the heavy criticism at

a time when he was struggling with his form, and the so called “safe pair of hands” that he brought as Captain after the series win against The West Indies was criticised as wanting. Luckily for him (though I am not sure that luck had much to do with it) the team bounced back at The Oval and he is now the man of the moment and the doubts that surfaced after Headingley have been conveniently forgotten.

The same “topsy turvey” ride is true of all leaders in the public eye (have we forgotten how quickly Gordon Brown’s star dipped shortly after taking over as prime Minister) and to a lesser extent of those in business. As leaders it can take a great deal to build our leadership credentials, and one disappointing result to ruin them. We are expected to build for the future but deliver the immediate (particularly in a listed organisation that has the City to satisfy), we rely on and can be let down by our teams, and have to react instantly to organisational changes that those at the top have had weeks and months to consider.

So why would anyone want to be a leader? In particular, why do you want to be one? If you can’t answer the latter, then you’ve some serious thinking to do!