

ONE SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL!

You know how when asked what their ambitions are all beauty pageant contestants claim to want to work for world peace? Well, it's much the same thing in business. It doesn't matter whether it's white collar executives, blue collar supervisors or even hospital nurse you canvas - whenever you ask people in organisations which set of competencies they would most like to develop they all say they want to become more effective leaders. When we ask chief executives what are the biggest problems they face, they unerringly reply that they need more leaders. And in almost every interview that is conducted at management level there is a section on leadership and once the appropriate questions are asked a rating is assigned and it's normally low.

It's worth while stopping to consider why effective leadership is considered to be in short supply. There may be two main reasons for this. Firstly, despite the fact that organisations want leaders they tend to structure their hierarchy in such a way to kill leadership. Secondly, our understanding of leadership and what it is, is distorted. There are a million and one books that profile great leaders and just as many others dedicated to identifying the leadership recipe, what is fast becoming that tired cliché 'leadership competencies'. I think that's where we miss much of the point, by thinking that trying to emulate one person's success or following a set format is all that's needed. After all, identifying what makes one person an over achiever is one thing – following in their footsteps is quite another. As Bill Burns, CEO of CHF, the \$20 million global pharmaceutical division of Roche says "The idea of us all becoming Jack Welch is nonsense."

We also need to recognise that there are no universal leadership characteristics. What works for one leader won't work for another and just as in business you need different things at different times, different leaders are needed in different situations. Last week I spoke about Jose Mourinho, Manager of Chelsea Football Club with his star quality and exceptional leadership skills. When he was first recruited 'the special one' was going to change Chelsea's pattern in the football league. At that time Chelsea hadn't won the FA cup in over 50 years so clearly a new direction and approach was called for. Mourinho provided that change. His inspirational style, good looks and charisma were very much needed for the Chelsea of a few years ago where both the team and its supporters were crying out for some sparkle and an injection of enthusiasm. And Mourinho gave it that shot in the arm – he truly was the man of the moment. But now that moment has passed. With Chelsea firmly on track, another type of leadership

There are countless examples of leaders who have their time and place but whose qualities and skills became redundant as situations changed. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill during the Second World War knew that he had a vital task in building the morale of the British people, and spent enormous energy working on radio speeches to the country at large. Full of bravado and inspiration his style was so suited to the time, yet in the post war election of 1946 despite leading Britain to victory he lost power. His Man of Iron persona and ferocious British Bulldog style was ill-suited to the reconstruction and reparatory agenda of post-war Britain. His time was up.

We need to adopt a more dynamic and flexible approach when selecting leaders and also to ensure that our organisations, their bureaucracy and entire set-up does not strangle or suppress the leader in many of our managers. Its not so much that XYZ are the characteristics which leaders possesses but more about each and every person understanding what their own particular leadership assets are to business and capitalising on this. With Churchill it was his ability to energise the patriot in almost every Brit. Contrast that with Nelson Mandela's wonderful almost chameleon flexibility that allows him to be freedom fighter in one context and ambassador for peace in another. In 1994 he was exactly what South Africa needed, someone who could build bridges, heal old wounds and visualise a national unity where separateness had reigned supreme.

When looking to appoint a leader it's almost imperative that you do not bring out the old JD and design your recruitment advert to suit. Instead sit down and ask what exactly does the business need at the moment – a Churchill, a Mandela, a despotic dictator or a democratic power sharer? If you are in need of streamlining your operations, increasing productivity and developing the lean look then seek out the Churchillian hard driving executive who can be ruthless when needed, focused and logical. If your major organisational challenge and highest organisational risk is motivation and staff retention then go for your warm fuzzy leader in the Mandela mould, capable of inspiring, motivating and fostering a sense of well being in the corporate family. And if it's a dose of innovation and craziness that's required to propel the business forward then it might just be a cross between Fidel Castro and Captain Jack Sparrow that you need to attract!

So it's not that leadership is in short supply – it's our blinkered approach and failure to recognise that it comes in many different guises that is in over supply. Cometh the moment, cometh the man!

