

EXECUTIVE INSIGHTS

Written by Vincent Gauthier

Developing leaders in the Asian business landscape

Week 3
What is leadership

Executives can forget why mutual respect is paramount and how they should actually like the people they're leading



Know thyself above all

There is no single authoritative definition of effective leadership. When I ask senior executives in training classes to list the attributes of an effective leader, they usually have little difficulty in coming up with a list, as most people recognise a good leader when they see one.

Some will mention the need for vision, setting a consistent example, or having excellent interpersonal and communication skills. Others in the group will probably point out the importance of holding people accountable, coaching colleagues, being decisive and confident, and having the ability to implement agreed strategies.

Fortunately, those answers, which are based on a combination of experience, observation and instinct, are also borne out by the findings of detailed research conducted by the Defence Leadership and Management Centre of the Defence Academy in Britain.

This survey initially sought the opinions of serving generals about the nature of leadership at a strategic level. However, it also went further to gather comments from senior employees in another 13 major British organisations, covering the public and private sectors, academia and the civil service.

What emerged after analysis were eight model attributes of leadership.

In no particular order, these were integrity, vision, communication, decision-making, innovation, a focus on development, humility and professional knowledge.

With reference to these ideal characteristics, the academy also felt able to offer its own definition, stating that: "Leadership is visionary; it is the projection of personality and character to inspire the team to achieve the desired outcome."

Clear as that is, it would be a mistake to take it as all embracing.

At a recent seminar, Dominic Brittain, a senior bomb disposal officer for the Hong Kong Police, provided additional context and highlighted certain elements that had possibly been overlooked.

He pointed out even the underlying attributes could mean different things to different people.

For example, integrity could be broadly defined as knowing right from wrong, but in different cultures or business environments, the boundaries accepted by individual leaders might easily shift.

Mr Brittain also noted that the research made no mention of the fact that leaders should essentially like the people they lead, and my own experience confirms this is a fundamental aspect that is often forgotten.

It is all too common to think that liking one's subordinates sounds soft or even unprofessional, but it is much better to regard this as the basis of healthy working relationships.

Leaders often fall into the trap of trying to accommodate people on their teams whom they fundamentally dislike or despise. In the long run, this is bound to create friction, unnecessary distractions and, perhaps, festering rivalries.

Good leaders serve followers, just as good followers serve. A relationship of service goes both ways and benefits both. But to truly be of service is even more difficult for the leader than the follower

Tao Te Ching
Chapter 61

All those tensions, of course, soon reduce the leader's general effectiveness and increase the need for other approaches – notably using fear, the promise of reward or punishment, or rigid authority – to get subordinates to perform as required.

If employees follow because they know the leader has their best interests at heart, things are sure to run more smoothly. A stronger sense of mutual respect and understanding will develop, and productivity will soar.

A further attribute I would add to the list is self-awareness. According to Daniel Goleman, an authority on emotional intelligence, self-awareness is the ability to "recognise and understand your mood, emotions and drives, as well as their effect on others".

In my experience, a lack of this quality is the single biggest cause of ineffectiveness among leaders.

That's because, in many situations, they simply don't understand the nature and extent of the impact they have on others.

They fail to see how their moods and

actions set the tone for the whole organisation and how their instructions can trigger a chain reaction of emotions among employees.

At the individual level, virtually every leader will claim to be effective. If self-justification is needed, they can always point to their position.

However, this ignores two facts: climbing an organisation's hierarchy is not always a true measure of performance, and success in one arena can mean little when compared against external standards.

So, self-awareness is essential. It allows individuals to perceive when and where their behaviour must change, and to realise that traits, such as aggression, which may help early in a career, become less desirable the higher they go.

For example, it is one thing for a sales manager to take snap decisions about rate offers and special deals to attract new customers.

For a chief executive, though, the process must take full account of the views of colleagues, investors and other stakeholders, plus the long-range impact on each of them.

Consultation and building consensus become part of the job. On assuming a leadership role, it is no longer possible to operate as before or to convince oneself that everyone else must adapt.

The new situation demands a new approach. Any leader who fails to recognise that and mistakenly adopts a "take no prisoners" style is heading for trouble and destined to alienate colleagues and potential allies along the way.

For these reasons, one of the fundamental parts of any leadership development programme should be to help people understand themselves and their impact on others.

Typically, this is done with various assessment tools. In my view, the best approach is to encourage self-evaluation by combining a valid personality test with a 360-degree assessment.

Together, these provide a very accurate understanding of a potential leader's behaviour and emotions, as well as the motivations and personality traits which drive them.

It also pays to consult staff at all levels about effective leadership, to discover what a company is missing in this respect.

Hewitt's recent research on best employers in Hong Kong did just that. It

Four steps to develop self-awareness

1 Select a suitable tool to assess your personality. Choose one that has a good reputation and measures you against a normative database of people in positions similar to yours. Typically, the best tests include a debriefing session with a certified user of the tool. Also, aim to use a well-researched 360-degree feedback model to assess overall competencies. Such tools may be specific to your company or bought "off the shelf".

2 Administer the two tests and, for the personality assessment, remember to answer the questions at a normal speed and honestly. Don't try to pick out right or wrong answers – there is no such thing as a right or wrong personality. For the 360-degree feedback test, make sure the people rating you will give honest answers. Don't choose colleagues you think will give all positive comments or people with whom you have obvious conflicts.

3 Study the results in a debriefing session, preferably with a company employee certified to conduct the test or with a suitably qualified external consultant. That person should be trained in dealing with senior executives and allow plenty of time for the session.

4 Develop goals and action plans based on the results and the subsequent discussion. The plan should take full account of strengths and weaknesses revealed by the process. The best companies will also assign a coach or a mentor to help each executive and to ensure that plans are implemented.

asked staff specific questions about leaders and the results showed that, even among the top-ranked companies, about 25 per cent of employees felt their senior leaders were not effective.

Digging deeper, the reasons for this could be attributed to anything from poor selection procedures to limited experience, inadequate training, or unrealistic expectations.

The classic examples involved promoting exceptional leaders of small teams to general management roles, without giving them the different skill sets required.

Since this appears to be such a widespread problem, we will examine in the next article what some of the best companies are doing to develop the leaders of tomorrow and make them genuinely effective.

Vincent Gauthier is managing consultant at Hewitt Associates, a global human resources consulting and outsourcing company

On the web visit www.classifiedpost.com/opinionpoll to participate in our online poll: "Do you feel like your organisation has the leadership succession for the future?" The results will be published in this column.

HRTrends Written by Catherine Macer

Old hands hammer out new career path

Opening a flagship store in a new overseas market is a special kind of challenge in the retail sector. It takes tenacity and vision to establish brand awareness, build product knowledge and set the required performance standards for everyone from the general manager right down to recently hired frontline staff.

Britain-based home improvements retailer B&Q has done just this by opening its first local store in East Kowloon earlier this month. – But there is an extra dimension in that the company has introduced a whole new concept in the shape of a "superstore" focused on home décor and improvement. Shoppers will be able to find anything from nuts and bolts to tins of paint, window frames to bathroom sets, all under one roof.

"It is a one-stop shop," said Johanna Cheung Hoi-ka, human resources manager of B&Q Asia, who added that, as a home decoration and DIY supplier, the store would have a unique market position.

DIY guide

- Home improvement retailer opens first one-stop superstore in Hong Kong.
- Keen to recruit older staff with trade skills and experience to add value for customers
- Particular demand for expert painters, decorators and builders to be the store's "trade experts" and help customers with DIY inquiries.
- B&Q targeted retired or semi-retired craftspeople with years of trade knowledge and expertise who wanted to apply their skills in a retail environment.
- Wide-ranging training programmes to familiarise staff with the retail environment and to orientate their skills to the company's needs
- Experienced staff encouraged to share their trade skills with younger colleagues, as well as customers

Achieving this depends on recruiting high-quality staff with the right experience. The firm is keen to find people with specialist skills and has been hiring craftsmen including painters, decorators and builders to be the store's "trade experts" and help customers with DIY inquiries.

B&Q targeted retired or semi-retired craftspeople with years of trade knowledge and expertise who wanted to apply their skills in a retail environment.

"These people will help our clients by offering product knowledge and doing demonstrations," Ms Cheung said. This hiring initiative is in line with corporate policy as 24 per cent of the firm's 38,000 employees worldwide are over the age of 50 and many of them have returned to work

after a break or have changed career direction. With the average age of Hong Kong's population steadily rising, employers hiring older workers will be able to benefit from this growing "resource".

"We need people who are mature, who can understand our customers' needs and analyse their problems to create successful home solutions," Ms Cheung said. "In the recruitment process, we ask them technical questions to see whether they are able to do a good job." Such questions might include asking an applicant to teach someone how to paint a wall, or to explain the difference between different kinds of paint. In that way, it is possible to test practical communication skills and if a person is good in their field.

New recruits also go through in-house training courses to help them adapt their core skills to B&Q's retailing needs. Programmes will include store-operating procedures, customer-service skills, sales techniques, health and safety, and crime-prevention awareness.

"Everybody does this training, and we try to make it fun [by giving] it an interactive format," Ms Cheung said. "But it is particularly important for the trade experts because they need to know our brands when they do demonstrations."

Once a person is "up and running" they will have the opportunity to share their skills not just with customers, but also with other staff. This apprentice-style relationship makes older staff feel valued and appreciated for their knowledge and work experience, while younger staff learn the skills of the trade from respected professionals.

This has proved a successful formula in other countries and, with the demographic shift now evident in Hong Kong, it is one that other local companies may well look to replicate.



Johanna Cheung, B&Q Asia's HR manager. Photo: Dustin Shum

QuickFixes

Getting to grips with delegation

As a new manager I need to delegate more work to my team – how do I do this effectively?

Good delegation is a critical ingredient of any successful manager. Why is it so important? Because it allows you to concentrate on higher priority work matters and ultimately create a positive culture of empowerment in your staff.

Individuals who are not used to delegating can initially find it a daunting task. It involves believing and trusting in others around you to undertake or complete parts of your job that you are responsible for. This means you need to have trust in your subordinates and the ability to "let go" or release control to them.

Failure to delegate can result in an unhappy, demotivated workforce who feel undervalued. It may restrict their career development and they could feel you do not rate them as successful or dependable. Remember, the opposite of delegation is micro-management – providing too much input, direction and constant reviews of delegated work.

The first step to delegation is preparation. To delegate effectively you need a suitable task and a willing individual. Dumping work on someone is not the same as delegating a task. Offloading tasks you do not like or when you feel under pressure or in a tight situation could potentially fail. Pick an appropriate task and clearly explain it, specify and quantify the final outcome, but allow the person to use their own methodology to complete the task.

Secondly, you must have a dependable and capable person to delegate to. Match the task to an individual's skills and talents. Do not always delegate to the same person as this could lessen confidence among the rest of the team.

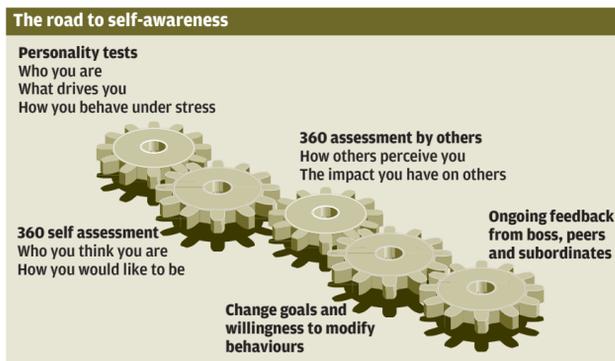
Thirdly, keep track of progress and provide feedback. Schedule regular meetings and ask open questions. Try to keep things positive and provide sincere praise and reinforcement. Focus on the end results and not on telling people how to get the job done your way. People work more effectively when they feel ownership for their efforts.

Lastly, provide rewards and show appreciation. Become known as someone who provides incentives and rewards good work. These could be tangible rewards such as pay increments, bonuses and promotions or simply recognition in team meetings.

Article contributed by James Cars, director – banking and finance on behalf of Hudson, which delivers specialised professional recruiting, outsourcing and human resource solutions worldwide

YOUR CHANCE TO WIN

Tell us about your interesting leadership-related stories in the workplace for a chance to win a copy of *Make the Right Move*, a guide to help managers become better decision makers. Winning entries will be published in Classified Post. Send your entries, which should be no longer than 250 words, to editor@classifiedpost.com, with the subject "Executive Insight Contest".



SCMP GRAPHIC

SOURCE: HEWITT