

Lessons in leadership from history's great leaders

There's no single formula for successful leadership but there are lessons from some of the world's great leaders that can help, says Noel Penrose.

Contrary to popular belief, great **leadership** doesn't come from modelling yourself on the style of a particular person. We can all be inspired by great leaders but, in doing so, we should look at how they reacted to the situations in which they found themselves.

Winston Churchill is considered a great leader. He showed vision, energy and tenacity and he had a powerful way with words that galvanised others. During the war, he was certainly the right man at the right moment but he was not seen as the right leader for peacetime Britain. His skills in adversity were less appropriate in post-war times.

And we have seen the reverse, with many a business leader performing well in times of market opportunity, only to struggle and fail in times of economic adversity, unable to make the right choices or face the difficult decisions that recession brings. 'It takes a rough sea to make a great Captain' is an old saying about the true challenge of leadership in difficult circumstances.

There are many ways in which a leader can lead: from inspirational leaders to insightful leaders; charismatic leaders to authoritarian leaders; risk-takers to principled beacons of stability and trust. There is no single style or approach to successful leadership in business, but each of us will have certain elements that appeal to our inner-sense of what is the right type of leadership for us, given our own experiences, backgrounds, moral code and sense of responsibility.

JEDI

When interviewing for new staff, I would always ask myself if I would want to work for the candidate sat in front of me; if so, that made them a leader for business in my eyes. To help me make my assessment, I'd look for the JEDI in candidates. Not Obi-Wan Kenobi's mind trick - 'these are not the droids you're looking for' - but the acronym that stands for Judgment, Empathy, Drive and Initiative. I'd try to measure candidates against these four character aspects:

- Judgment: a sense of right and wrong; a feel for what is sensible, practical, appropriate and balanced
- Empathy: the ability to engage with people, get along at all levels; to connect, to convince and to be a seller of ideas
- Drive: energy, commitment and passion to stay the course; making things happen and moving the team along with you
- Initiative: a willingness to act; considering alternatives; decisiveness and an acceptance of risk

A useful definition of leadership is that 'leaders attach themselves to a cause and take others on the journey with them'. To achieve this, leadership involves 'being' and 'doing'. For me, the four JEDI characteristics are important in 'being' a leader. They're attributes you need to have if you're going to take others with you. But leadership is also about what you do. So here are three key actions of strong business leadership:

1. Be proactive

In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Brutus explains how some people see, and take advantage of, the tide of opportunity:

"There is a tide in the affairs of men
which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
omitted, all the voyage of their life
is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures."

Do you seek to influence your own outcome (exercise free will and take the tide at the flood) or do you wait and allow destiny to direct and shape actions and consequences? Essentially, do you make things happen or wait for things to happen to you?

2. Be persistent

Calvin Coolidge, president of the USA in the late 1920s, said: "Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan 'press on' has solved, and always will solve, the problems of the human race."

Persistence requires a willingness to fail and, for me, is a key leadership trait in business. Don't watch from the outside but be in the game, leading the way, making the effort, experiencing the delights and also the disappointments of challenge.

3. Acknowledge others

In 1676, Sir Isaac Newton said: "If I have seen further, it is because I was standing on the shoulders of giants." Here, Newton acknowledges the contribution of his predecessors. However, it is just as relevant for a leader to acknowledge the team that enables the delivery of the goal. The central theme from this quote is having a willingness and ability to see things through, to bring the goal to life and to be big enough to recognise that others have made a contribution in making it happen.

For me, leadership in business is about being able to respond effectively to whatever is required by the situation. If you've got the four key characteristics (judgment, empathy, drive and initiative) and if you're proactive, persistent and if you acknowledge others, I'm willing to bet that you'll be a pretty effective business leader.

*Noel Penrose is chairman of **Juniper2**, an independent consultancy that helps owner-managers to build their business and improve profitability.*