

Character and Leadership in an Age of Image

This article is adapted from an address to the Rhodes and Marshall Scholars at a gathering hosted by The Trinity Forum Europe at Rhodes House, Oxford, on Saturday, 8 November 2008.

I am absolutely delighted to have been invited to address this exciting group of 2008 Rhodes and Marshall Scholars, and in particular to do so in the week when the people of the United States of America have voted so decisively for change—in a bold and new way—and have voted in such powerful numbers that, I think we all feel, the democratic process, in these troubled times, has been the overall winner.

I wish Barack Obama all the very best as he leads the free and Western world over the next four or eight years—of these very challenged and challenging times. But, of course, Obama's task is essentially just that—it is the task of leadership, a very different task to that of presenting yourself as someone who can win an election—someone who can promise much, who can present the image of success. That is, as I suspect he is now beginning to realise, very different from actually doing it!

So if I understand my remit correctly this afternoon, my task is to offer some thoughts and ideas about leadership generally—and I will offer a personal view, not necessarily a closely argued thesis or model, but I offer my views as a lead-in to the subject and our subsequent discussion.

We all recognise that leadership is an important subject, but I suspect we can also agree that it is also a difficult area. Discussion has long raged as to whether leaders are born or made. If they are made, how is it done, and what qualities and characteristics should they exhibit?

First Thoughts

There are many different ways of unpacking leadership. Some see leadership as consisting simply of a series of dilemmas—and these dilemmas, loosely bundled into five groups of challenges certainly help to get into the subject. I think that particularly in a business sense these challenges of

- Leading the establishment of reputation and relationships
- Leading change
- Leading growth and innovation
- Project management, and
- Leading learning,

are useful outcome, or capability, perspectives on the subject.

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But there is another theme I wish to highlight early on—and that is encapsulated in the words of the late Viscount Hambleden, the founder of the WH Smith business empire. “Character and integrity” he said, “are as important in a manager or a leader as capability”. And this is something in which I believe very strongly. It is at the core of what I believe to be effective leadership, not just in the business area but particularly in a military setting—and even more so given the nature of operations and conflicts in which my soldiers are called upon to fight nowadays. But, as I will try to argue, his words have equal applicability in the business-space and not just the battle-space. And I will come back to character and integrity later.

Now, I first came across leadership as a subject to be considered formally while I was a Cadet at Sandhurst. It was treated differently to other subjects we studied—for leadership discussions, we didn’t sit in the classroom, but we sat around in armchairs, in the Company Bar, or Anteroom as we called it, and we were asked for our ideas, as opposed to just being told what to do and what to think.

I believe this sets leadership apart—it is a personal thing, an individual thing, an intuitive thing. Despite that, I don’t go as far as to subscribe to the notion that leaders are born, not made. Yes, a bit of natural leadership ability helps, and a lot of natural leadership helps a lot—but if you have any leadership ability, then thinking about the subject, studying the subject, experimenting, modelling yourself on a leader you respect, all those things can really pay dividends.

But when we sat in our armchairs at Sandhurst we had a range of erudite discussions, on the one hand listing the qualities of a leader and, on the other hand, debating the merits of a more functional approach to leadership techniques. I recall extensive discussion about the thoughts of one of my predecessors as Head of the Army, the late Field Marshal Lord Harding, who had produced an impressive list of the qualities—in his view—to be exhibited by a good leader, based on his experiences. He said a good leader needed:

- Absolute Fitness
- Complete Integrity
- Enduring Courage
- Daring Initiative
- Undaunted Will-Power

And, interestingly, he stressed the adjectives, as well as the nouns—Absolute Fitness, Complete Integrity, Enduring Courage, Daring Initiative, Undaunted Will-Power. To these he added three other prerequisites—Knowledge, Judgment, and Team Spirit. Now, all that is good stuff from a soldier’s perspective—certainly applicable in the battle-space, but probably also more widely applicable in the business-space and elsewhere. And I think Lord Harding’s emphasis on fitness was not just on physical fitness, some will be relieved to know, but on fitness of mind, too—agility of mind, if you like.

Behaviour not Qualities

But as respected and useful as possession of a large number of key qualities is, our discussions at Sandhurst also turned to functional models of leadership behaviour. At that time, the Action-Centred leadership model put forward by Professor John Adair of the Industrial Society was very influential. His “Three Balls” Venn diagram approach of the individual but overlapping and interlocking leadership elements, had much resonance. His model required the identification of the need to blend:

- Identifying and achieving the Task, while
- Maximising the efforts of the Team, and while, most critically,
- Looking after the interests of the Individual

—all this seemed like a winning formula to us. And that single construct of Task, Team, and Individual still retains great merit—but, one wonders, is it enough?

What Are You Trying to Do?

Now while a dry debate about the merits of a qualities approach to leadership or a functional approach is very interesting, it remains essentially theoretical and, by definition, not that useful.

However, I think a key question that roots our discussion rather more, is to analyse what it is that the leader is actually trying to do. And to answer that, I suggest that we need to have an understanding of what level of activity the leader is trying to lead within, and to lead at.

In my sphere of work, we separate out activity into three levels—the Strategic, the Operational, and the Tactical.

Now the first and last of those are well known. The Strategic level is where the big thoughts are thought, and every business endeavour or large organisation seems to be well supplied with strategic thought—strategies for this, strategies for that—probably too many strategies.

And then down below, where it all happens, is Tactics—where the rubber hits the road—and in this sense the tactical level is about delivery.

Alan Leighton, who is a very talented leader but has struggled to make a go of the Post Office, was very interesting on this in his Windsor Leadership Trust Annual Lecture a couple of years ago. His view is that 20 percent of a business is about Strategy and the other 80 percent is Delivery. But critically, in his view, the glue that holds it all together is Communication—successfully communicating the “big idea” to those who have to make it happen. And if communication is delivered by leaders or managers who know their stuff, who can inspire their staff, and who can drive through to their objectives, then this is probably another commendable formula.

But in my construct, this overlooks the key level of activity, and this is the Operational level, which sits between the Strategic and the Tactical, and which is the level that sits between the ideas and the action—it is the level which turns the ideas into action. In my book it is the level which lifts the mediocre to the exceptional. It is the level that lifted Nelson, Wellington, and Montgomery into the history books, and the likes of Bill Gates and Richard Branson into the World's Richest list.

It is at the Operational level where the general or the captain of industry does his real work, and where an end-to-end plan is formulated to transform the original idea—the big idea—into success on the battlefield or to serious profit on the balance sheet.

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It requires serious intellectual rigour to do this—to devise a plan, a campaign plan, to take one in a series of steps (which we in the Army would call battles or engagements) to the pre-identified end-state and success in the campaign. But the compilation of the plan is nothing without the application of energy, drive, and inspiration to take the team on the journey. This aspect of leadership is key and it begs the question: will those who are integral to your plan actually come on the journey with you? Because leadership is one thing, but successfully promoting followership is another. To arrive with no-one behind you is a very lonely experience! And many a young officer has also only been followed out of curiosity.

Application of Strategic, Operational, Tactical

Now you might be thinking that it is all very well to think in terms of separating out the strategic from the operational from the tactical in a large enterprise like an army or a big multinational company, but where is the application in a small firm, business, or a charity?

I would suggest that in any application, size does not matter. What does matter is a proper analysis of what you are doing at any one time and why. Even in a small business there will always be moments when a strategic review is needed. There will always be moments, probably the majority of time, when leading the workforce at the tactical level at the shop floor will be essential to delivery. Most critically, there must be those moments when you engage in operational-level thought—to work out the campaign plan which translates the strategic objectives into tactical, practical, and—hopefully, in the business-space—financial success.

My point here is that whether in a large or small enterprise, what is really critical is weaving together those three vital levels of activity. If necessary, one person can do all three provided he or she knows what he is doing and at what level he is thinking at any given moment—and that, I suggest, requires clarity of thought and discipline of mind.

Delivery

So if our successful leader—maybe even our Barack Obama—has thought about what he is going to do and why, and has identified the qualities he needs to be effective and also has a good understanding of the need to balance the Task, the Team, and the Individual then perhaps we are on our way.

But then the question is: how to do all this?

In my organisation we exercise leadership through a process known as Mission Command—and we aim to do this both in barracks and in the field. I would extrapolate the principle more widely still. I have already touched on the key elements of this. Essentially there are three components to Mission Command, all of which hinge around the leader:

First, the Commander, the Senior Manager, the Leader needs to think through his problem and convert his strategic goals into the front end of his Operational or Campaign Plan, and this results in him clearly setting out his Intent. He needs to have applied sufficient analysis and intellectual rigour so that he can set out to his subordinates or his employees his statement of what needs to be done and his overall intentions as to how it is to be done. This is more than just a Vision Statement.

The second stage, in a non-prescriptive way, is to separate out the tasks that need to be done and delegate them to subordinates, along with the necessary manpower, equipment, and financial resources to carry out those tasks. But he doesn't tell them what to do—he tells them what they are to achieve; this is output- or outcome-focussed, not input-focussed.

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Finally—and this is where the process can go wrong—having delegated the task appropriately, he needs to supervise the execution of those tasks. And this not in a way that stifles the initiative of the subordinates to whom the tasks have been delegated, but in a subtle way, remembering that while tasks can be delegated, responsibility can never be delegated—the buck always stops with the boss.

Responsibility

Without going down a rabbit hole unduly, I think that the degree of ownership and responsibility came home to me most starkly in July 2000 when I gave evidence for the prosecution at the trial of one Radovan Krstic before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in the Hague. General Krstic had commanded the Drina Corps of the Bosnian Serb Army at the time of the capture of Srebrenica and the subsequent massacre in Eastern Bosnia in July 1995. He was about the same age as me, had a professional military background in the Yugoslav National Army that had begun at the same age as mine had in the British Army, and in 1995 was commanding a formation similar in size and organisation to the 3rd (United Kingdom) Division which I was then commanding.

His mistake, on 13 July 1995, was to accept a mission from his superior and develop a plan that led directly to the massacre of 7,000 to 8,000 Muslim men and boys. He had accepted ownership of the operation, became responsible for the plan, based his defence in Court on having delegated his responsibility, and—was convicted and sentenced to forty-two years imprisonment for a variety of war crimes.

When we say glibly, “the buck stops here”, for Radovan Krstic it stopped for him in spades on the day he was convicted! That said—I know, he knows, and the Court also knows that his real failure was a complete collapse of personal moral courage. Had he refused to accept the mission from General Ratko Mladic, or talked his superior out of the idea, then he would not be in prison now, and upwards of 8,000 people would still be alive. The risks of the morally correct line were obviously high, but on the day he failed the test.

Secondly, I also mentioned the importance for a commander of setting out his Intent, and it follows on from the Krstic story—namely that a commander who must accept responsibility for the actions falling out from his orders and plans, can only really do so by his personal engagement with the planning process from the outset—he makes the plan, and owns it for good or ill. This point has wider application than just in the military environment.

Techniques

Coming back to techniques for supervision, I am struck by the obvious simplicity of one of Rudy Guillian’s techniques, which he discusses in his book on leadership. It is not rocket science, but the disciplined process of holding very regular meetings with your principal subordinates as a high priority event, even if rather time-consuming, gives the subordinates the chance to not just update the boss, but also to seek guidance or confirmation of guidance on a certain point. Perhaps more importantly, it also gives the boss the chance to touch the tiller as necessary, or to up the horsepower. In any event, he can provide focus, if there is a clash of priorities—and it is an opportunity for the will of the boss, the leader, to be imposed.

Certainly in my last appointment as Commander in Chief Land Command, when I had responsibility for managing the 70,000 members of the Field Army and a budget of some £5.5 Billion, the weekly senior staff meeting was an invaluable means to exert my influence over a very large and disaggregated command. Although the temptation to cancel it because of other time pressures was often attractive, to use the hour on a Monday morning was, almost literally, priceless.

Leadership—The Spiritual Dimension

Now, at the start I made reference to Viscount Hambleden’s declaration that “Character and integrity are as important in a manager as capability”. I sense that, once again, I have already touched on aspects

of both character and integrity in what I have said so far. A leader does indeed need certain qualities, of which integrity is key, and at the same time there are certain capabilities that a leader needs as well—to understand the objectives, to map out the route from strategic end-state to tactical decisions, and above all to communicate his intent clearly while delegating responsibly.

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But I wonder if these qualities and capabilities that I have suggested are enough. Fitness, Integrity, Courage, Initiative, and Will-Power—these things, and more, are all really important, but are they enough?

Indeed as an organisation the British Army, which I lead, has itself identified six Core Values which are the heart of the ethos of the Army. Indeed we now educate our soldiers in certain core values that, in a previous generation, they may well have picked up in their family or wider community. But I wonder too if these six Core Values—Selfless Commitment, Courage, Discipline, Integrity, Loyalty, and Respect for Others—are themselves enough?

My own feeling is that a range of leadership qualities and those core values provide a very sound moral baseline—a baseline that is acceptable to all and quite a challenge to live up to. But, and this is a question I often ponder, is a sound moral baseline enough? Should there not also be a spiritual dimension to this? I believe there should.

And, of course, it is that word “believe” or “belief” that is at the heart of any spiritual dimension. . . .

For some, belief in the Cause, belief in the Leader, or even (in my organisation, within the tribal nature of the British Army) belief in the Regiment—will be enough. But I am not so sure. What really sustains, in my view, is something more than this—something far bigger than ourselves, something bigger and deeper than we can imagine or rationalize for ourselves.

This first came home to me as a young platoon commander in Belfast in the early 1970s when my platoon and I were engaged in a fierce and protracted gun battle after which several terrorists were left dead and one of my soldiers had been killed. We had all been frightened—even though no one admitted it!

That experience told me that even the toughest of men, when the chips are down and the reality of life and death confronts, these people are reaching out into the spiritual dimension, beyond the rational and the moral!

But I don't think this just applies to armies in a combat situation. There is an application to any situation of pressure, stress, or challenge when individuals are stretched to their physical or psychological limits.

And I think the truly effective leader needs to recognise this (and he is, of course, personally challenged to provide what is needed) if he does not have some empathy with, or some experience of a spiritual dimension to his life himself. This is very much a personal thing and we might want to come back to this in discussion later.

Conclusion

There are traditional ways of understanding and developing leadership—the qualities approach and the functional approach are but two. But in today's more complex environment in both the business-space and the battle-space, there needs to be more.

I contend that the leader needs to analyse very carefully, at any moment in time, what he is trying to do and at what level of leadership. The Strategic, the Operational, and the Tactical levels of activity make different demands on the leader, and he needs to know this and understand the differences.

Moreover, he needs to have done his own homework, become crystal clear what he wants to achieve, and so can then—very clearly—articulate his Intent.

It is that statement of Intent that provides the focus for the sensible delegation of tasks, the framework for appropriate supervision, and the foundation of motivation.

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But what really gives the leader his authority—his right to lead—does at the end of the day come down to him, or her, as a person—the nature of their character and the degree of their integrity—and this is very different from image. In my book, character defines the person and answers the question as to whether this is someone to emulate or to follow, and with what enthusiasm.

Moreover, integrity establishes the moral baseline to lead. Is this someone who can be trusted? Is this someone whose instructions are honourable? Is this someone to commit to? Do does he really have legitimate interests at heart, or is this person simply a self-seeker, or purely interested in the bottom line? These are all judgements for the subordinates, the employees, the followers, the voters to make. Their judgements, I submit, will ultimately define success or failure in the enterprise—perhaps not in the short term, but certainly in the medium and long term.

Maybe to finish where I started—perhaps Barack Obama has now convinced the American people that he has the character to be elected President of the United States, but the acid test of his Presidency will be to see if he has the integrity to lead in the ways that he knows are right.

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