

Sometimes you must burn your boats

Strategy Series opinion piece published
in *Managing Partner Magazine*
October 2007

Keeping your options open is a philosophy to which many management teams subscribe, either overtly or by their actions. This isn't to say that unwavering dogma is a good thing, but rather that a clear sense of direction, being prepared to say 'no' to ideas that don't fit, and a commitment to achieving objectives, are crucial components of a successful firm. However, to catalyse thinking and ignite progress, something else is needed. That something is called leadership. When Julius Caesar ordered the pyromaniacs aboard his fleet on the beaches of England, was it an act of lunacy or of great leadership?

But what is the difference between a leader and a manager, for the two are surely not the same? An interesting delineation is suggested by John Kotter in *Leading Change*. Management, he contends, is fundamentally concerned with dealing with complexity; analysing situations, distilling them to their core, devising systems and controlling organisations. Leadership, on the other hand, is fundamentally about dealing with change; vision, engagement, alignment of people and resources. It is about putting the business in a position where it is ready for what the future brings.

Ralph Nader, the US politician and activist, said: "I start with the premise that the function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers". However, in most professional firms, the idea of producing a 'leader factory' is not viewed as desirable (especially by the current incumbents!). There is an inherent dislike of the whole concept of being led (or managed).

Many adopt an approach to leadership founded in the concept of *primus inter pares*, in that to lead a professional firm, respect must be commanded for one's ability as a professional before it can be earned as a leader. This is reinforced in an environment in which those in leadership positions are plucked from the professional base (often on a fixed tenure) and return to 'real work' after their appointed term.

Jim Collins is best known for his books *Built to Last* and *From Good to Great*, which seek to understand what shapes high-performance organisations. However, Collins is also the author of *Level 5 Leadership* (one of the most popular Harvard Business School papers on the subject of leadership). In this paper, he uses the sub-title 'The triumph of humility and fierce resolve' to summarise the defining qualities that separate the very best leaders from those

below. His research suggests that, while leaders at the lower four levels can be successful (sometimes very significantly so) they do not ultimately create the levels of sustainable competitive advantage for their business that allow it to outperform its peer group. They lack humility and fierce resolve.

The humility factor is well encapsulated in the ‘window and mirror’ metaphor. Level five leaders look in the mirror to apportion blame and out of the window to give credit, while lower level leaders have a tendency to look in the mirror for credit and out of the window for blame.

The second defining attribute of the level five leader is an unwavering will to succeed; they are resolute in the face of adversity, and through the force of their own determination and personality, enable their organisations to achieve that which was thought impossible.

A high level of self awareness and the ability to motivate others are key attributes great leaders possess, as they develop a personal style that is appropriate to their firm and the environment it faces. It is illustrated by Daniel Goleman (inventor of the concept of Emotional Intelligence) and his work on leadership. He discovered that, while technical ability and IQ are important, high levels of emotional intelligence are twice as significant in delivering excellent leadership.

What does all this mean to a partner who is newly appointed to a senior position seeking an appropriate leadership style? Often without formal training for the role to which they have been anointed, they face a myriad of pressures, from keeping internal partner politics balanced to dealing with ever more demanding client and competitive pressures. They are also invariably fettered by a partnership agreement that has been written to make it impossible for the incumbent to lead by edict with “contractual authority”, even if they were so naïve as to try to do so.

Leading this sort of business requires an authority forged by personality, the communication of clear vision, demonstrable commitment to walking the talk and unwavering determination to succeed.

