

What makes a successful leader?

What ensures success for a leader? Some would say that it is all about patronage or education or luck. But are there characteristics of the successful leader which are generic? All successful leaders have known setbacks. It is how they have responded to those setbacks, learnt lessons and moved on that distinguishes them, *says* **PETER SHAW**

A group of young leaders in their 20s may look similar. They all have energy, intellect and passion. But some will fall by the wayside; others will change direction while some will move into senior positions. To the external observer their move into seniority may seem effortless. But what has been going on behind the scenes? How have these people managed to keep moving forward and fulfil their potential?

Can I suggest six requirements needed to ensure success?

rigour, resilience, relationships, responsiveness, relaxation and responsibility

RIGOUR

Rigour is about focus and determination: it is not letting go when obstacles are put in the way. Rigour is about being clear on the vision of where you want to take a particular organisation or part of an organisation and letting that vision shape your thinking about next action. It is about having a framework that is robust and tested.

At the heart of rigour is:

- The quality of intellectual analysis
- The determination to take an idea through to effective delivery
- Ensuring operational success
- Self discipline in the use of time and energy

An essential element is giving sole undivided attention sequentially to specific issues and being rigorous in reaching conclusion in whatever time is available.

RESILIENCE

Resilience is about coping with the buffeting that comes through decision making in a faster, faster world. It involves holding firm to principles and values when all around seem to be losing theirs. It is about not letting the gremlins get you when you are struck by self doubt or even fear.

Key elements of resilience are:

- Coping effectively with failures and setbacks
- Continually learning and embedding new approaches based on successes and failures
- Being rooted in your personal values and principles which enable you to cope with criticism
- Developing the emotional strength to bounce back when things go wrong.

Resilience is not about throwing your weight around. It is not about getting cross or petulant. At the heart of resilience is that capability to hold firm and be confident in your own qualities and values.

RELATIONSHIPS

So often what makes the key difference is not the logic of an analysis, it is that ability to build alliances and persuade people about a particular course of action. Effective relationships are at the heart of all we do. Success only comes when others are persuaded.

Key elements are:

- Building productive relationships with the stakeholders who matter
- Ensuring that you always understand where the “customer” is coming from
- Building effective teams where there is a strong relationship of trust
- Repairing and renew relationships effectively

Every successful leader has built strong and effective teams which have a strong sense of purpose, a high level of trust and an openness to challenge. The quality of the relationships has led to the team being more than the sum of the parts. Often the best relationships have gone through difficult periods. It is only when honesty has broken out and differences have come to the surface and been worked through, that working relationships move to a new level of effectiveness.

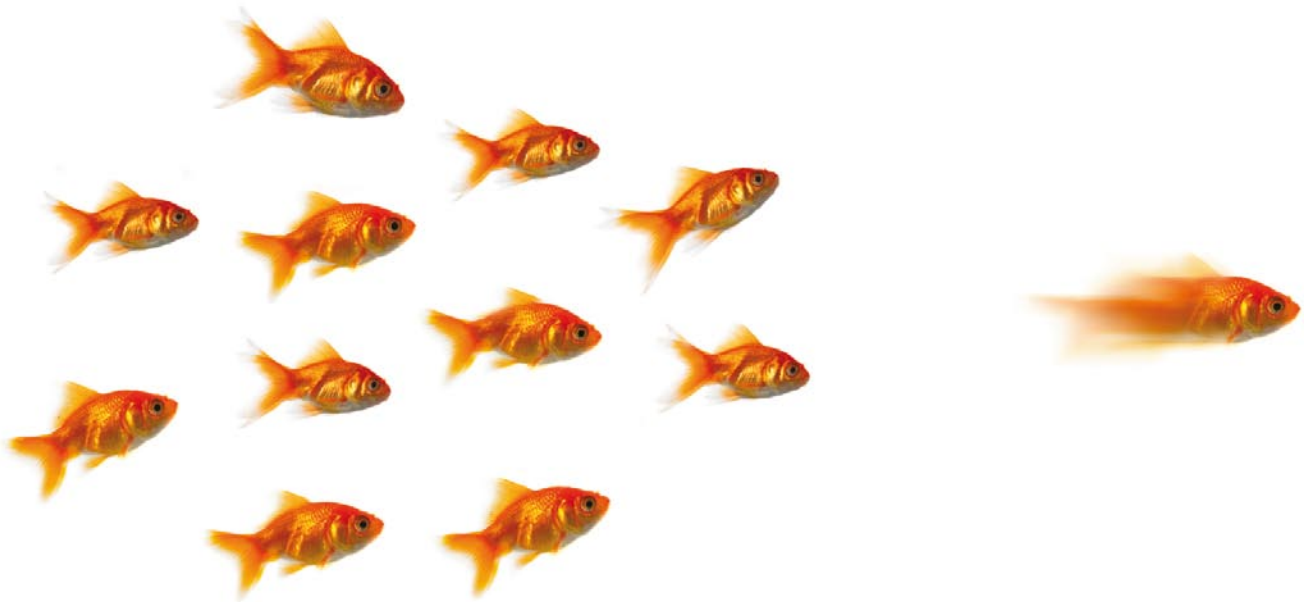
Success does not mean keeping relationships harmonious at any cost. It is about creating an environment where differences can be expressed frankly with a will to find a common purpose to reach successful outcomes.

RESPONSIVENESS

There is always that balance between clarity of principle and values alongside responding to different perspectives and external changes. It is being responsive and being seen to be responsive. Effective communication through listening, engaging, influencing and persuading is essential to success.

Peter Shaw





Responsiveness is about:

- Listening carefully to changing expectations
- Changing direction when the situation demands it
- Using input from colleagues at each stage to fine tune responsiveness
- Thinking ahead to anticipate future changes

External coaching is invaluable in strengthening responsiveness through helping a leader to understand themselves and how they are perceived. My time as a coach spent with senior leaders is often about enabling them to work through how they are going to respond to a range of different situations. Spending whole days observing clients and seeing how they respond or do not respond to others provides the coaching conversations with excellent data to help an individual become an ever more effective leader.

RELAXATION

What has relaxation got to do with becoming a successful public sector leader? It is perhaps the most essential ingredient of all! The individual who is utterly focused and relentless will eventually tire themselves out. Their energy is not a limitless resource. The best of leaders know how to nurture their energy. They are conscious of what gives them vitality, whether it is their families, their community, faith world, sport or entertainment. Knowing your sources of vitality and nurturing them is crucial to success.

Relaxation is about:

- Knowing how to use energy in the most effective way within the working day
- Being able to switch gear quickly from directive to reflective modes
- Having sources of vitality outside the work environment and nurturing and growing those sources of vitality
- Having a set of personal values or aspirations that are not excessively dominated by work.

A key question for the successful leader is how are they going to grow their sources of relaxation? It is often about the quality of the time allocated, not its quantity. The demanding leadership role will be time consuming. But how are those precious evenings off spent? How much energy is given to family and friends? What are the physical activities that you enjoy most, be it walking, jogging, running or cycling? The evidence again and again is that giving relaxation a top priority is essential to success as a leader.

RESPONSIBILITY

This might sound rather a heavy concluding word! It is the combination of clarity about individual responsibilities and knowing where the boundaries are. It is not feeling the responsibility of the whole world on your shoulders, but it is about clarity of accountability about what you are responsible for.

Responsibility is about:

- Being clear what you are going to deliver and seeing it through
- Building clear agreements about

your responsibilities and having clear boundaries

- Enabling others to fulfil their responsibilities without feeling that you have to be “the rescuer”
- Always celebrating when responsibilities have been delivered either by yourself or by your colleagues.

Responsibility is about taking it, demonstrating it, using it and then passing it on. It is not about clutching on to responsibility beyond your sell by date.

THE SIX RS

As you observe senior leaders, how do they score on these six Rs? What is it they do well that you can learn from? The leader with potential will always be learning and growing their capabilities in these six Rs. They will always be moving on in their thinking and reflecting on their leadership journey. So which R are you working on next?

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