



Foxtrot, waltz or disco? The dance of leadership

There is no doubt that Rob Goffee enjoys being provocative. The smile on his face as he turns a question on an inquisitor highlights his passion for getting people to think about original ideas. As Professor of Organisational Behaviour and Faculty Director for Executive Education, he has plenty of opportunity to hone his skills.





In 2000, his groundbreaking article written together with Gareth Jones, BT Professor of Organisational Development at Henley Management College and Visiting Professor of Organisational Behaviour at Insead, entitled 'Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?' was published in the *Harvard Business Review* and won the McKinsey award for the best paper.

The article was based on experience gathered over ten years of consulting to companies across Europe and the United States. All the executives were flummoxed by the question. "Without fail," says Professor Goffee, "the response was a sudden, stunned hush." He adds that executives had good reason to be scared: "You can't do anything in business without followers and followers in these empowered times are hard to find." People are unlikely to perform to the best of their ability with someone they don't respect or who they feel is not really interested in their ideas or welfare.

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A major reason the article has had such an impact, says Professor Goffee, is that it looked at the issue from a distinctively sociological point of view – as a contract between the leader and the follower. Previous research had tended to concentrate on the leaders themselves, based on a psychological understanding of, for example, the inherent traits attached to leaders or the styles of individual leaders. He makes sense of the issues by turning the issue around and examining the implied relationship between leaders and followers. What would make followers choose to follow someone?

That, says Professor Goffee, is relatively easy to understand. "Followers want to feel significant – they want to think that something



they do adds significantly to the whole. They want to feel part of the community. This is very hard and very complicated to construct. They want to feel they are all in it together. They also want excitement and therefore leaders need to have high energy and be highly resilient – they have to be the last one to give up. It is worth thinking about whether you give energy to people or whether you drain it from people. And finally they want authenticity. They want to be led by people – that is human beings."

Since the paper came out, Professors Goffee and Jones have been working on a book distilling the essence of what leaders need to bring to the relationship. The book, which is scheduled to come out next autumn, is organised around the phrase, 'Be yourself more with skill'. "We've discovered that inspirational leaders share four unexpected qualities: they selectively show their weaknesses; they rely heavily on intuition to gauge the appropriate timing and course of their actions; they manage employees with 'tough empathy'; and they reveal their differences. Without these skills people may find themselves in a top position but they are unlikely to capture the hearts and minds of people who work for them."

Being yourself...

Being yourself means being authentic and to do that you have to take a good look at your personality. What are your strengths and

weaknesses? How can you ensure that you are true to yourself in the workplace?

If you become aware of your weaknesses, you will be able to share some of those with your employees. But before you walk out and let your colleagues know the intimate details of your life, think carefully. Professor Goffee urges caution and balance on this one: "Obviously if you are an accountant, you don't want to say your weakness is not understanding cash flow. But you might want to say, if you are, that you are a workaholic, or that you are not good at timekeeping. But these need to be genuine weaknesses – employees will spot something that is not true. You really do have to be authentic."

Time spent in personal understanding is likely to reap great rewards

Shantharaju (SEP54), Managing Director of Gujarat Gas Company Limited (see page 15) remembers the exact time that he realised showing weakness would actually help him in his career. "It took me two years to stop thinking I could do everything and to acknowledge my weaknesses. In my earlier days I wouldn't admit to any until I found myself working on a task at 4am and failing heavily. I asked my subordinate to do the job and he managed to do it in three hours. That is when I realised that people can complement each other. Now I do say what I am weak at. For example I am good at building relationships but I am horrible at negotiations and so I bring other people into negotiation meetings to complement my skills."

Time spent in that personal understanding is likely to reap great rewards, says Professor Goffee. "If you become aware of your strengths, you will begin to understand what works and what does not. You will be able to take personal risks, and great leaders tend to take risks." So why should this be so? In a slightly circular argument, Professor Goffee

explains how all these facts link up: “Why should leaders reveal weakness? It is because it shows that they care. And leaders need to really care about the people they lead. Weakness tends to confirm humanity. Men might find this harder than women. If we show what we care about, we could be seen as vulnerable. And, unfortunately many people think that seniority should confer an image of invulnerability. As they go higher up the chain, some people lose their humanity. You have to know your emotions.”

Being yourself... ...more

Being yourself more, means being able to gain the right level of adaptability to new situations or cultures. “Good managers will try and conform to the company culture,” says Professor Goffee, “but great leaders will conform enough to retain their independence. In this situation some colleagues may think that you are not conforming at all.”

Really effective leaders, says Professor Goffee, are good at situation sensing. They can sniff out odd situations often before other people even realise there is a problem. Professor Goffee puts this down to well-honed

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intuitive skills that almost constitute a sixth sense. “It really stems from the power of observation,” he says. “It is often to be found in good salesmen who need to be able to ‘read’ their customers.”

These findings, however, beg the question as to where this skill originates? No one really knows the answers to this question, but



Professor Goffee thinks that we can at least improve whatever level of these skills we possess with practice and thinks it is possible to teach students.

“In the past we have sent students out during a lecture with instructions to walk within a three-mile radius of London Business School and look out for interesting things. Of course, some people go and have a natter over a cup of coffee; some people will mention the obvious things like Regent’s Park; but others, and they are usually in the minority, will say that they never realised there was a market beyond the library. Just by pointing out the different levels of observation within the class will stimulate the overall level of consciousness.”

It is very important to get the right mix of cultural adaptation and situation sensing skills. One of the reasons why previously successful people fail when they go to a new culture, says Professor Goffee, is that they may not have been able to adapt enough and so their situation sensing skills may not be working hard enough. “Some people freeze in new environments,” he says. “Some people over-please, and some people tease – that is they adapt just enough.”

David Arculus (CFE89 and MSc05), currently Chairman of Severn Trent, and soon to be Chairman of O₂ (see page 14), believes situation-sensing skills are imperative to leadership. “I can walk into an office or a factory and know whether something odd is

going on,” he says. “It’s not anything really you can put your fingers on – I mean people don’t sit there with their arms folded – it’s more a case of what they say doesn’t really add up or they are not being logical.”

Being yourself more... ... with skill

Professors Goffee and Jones conclude that ultimately leadership, from a sociological view, is about the management of social distance. To get people to follow you, you have to convey that you care about them, that you are authentic and that you are on their side; but to

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drive the organisation forward, there are times when you have to separate mentally from your followers to give yourself distance or objectivity. You cannot identify too closely with one colleague or even one part of the organisation. And truly great leaders, says Professor Goffee, know how to play this dynamic: “It’s like a dance,” he says. “It needs sense and timing.”

Goffee terms this natural push and pull

'tough empathy'. Nigel Morris (MSc19), co-founder of Capital One (see page 14), has direct experience of his tricky balance, having had to forge deep relationships with people to get them to follow him to a start-up and yet

It's like a dance, it needs sense and timing

keep the objectivity needed to steer a fast-growing company. But Nigel, who would spend vast amounts of time personally getting involved in the recruitment process, dislikes the label of creating distance.

"It is about creating the relationship with the employee and then getting the balance right. And I fear that if we go around saying that we have to create distance, then we will never get the open relationship we need to



keep authenticity, and honesty in the company culture will not take root.

"I think the challenge is to be able to get people to be willing to open up and speak to you in a way that can create value for the relationship, self-worth and the organisation.

To maintain objectivity, I think you also always have to start each day with a blank

sheet of paper. For example I made a good decision yesterday. But if I was making this decision today, what would I need to do? You constantly look at it because that's how you must look at a business that is constantly in the growth phase. And you have to be brutally honest about that with people."

So can we all be leaders? It might be fair to say that many people are not mentally equipped for the task, and some do not want to take on the risk. For those who do, Professor Goffee suggests a key tip: Find a 'third place' – somewhere away from family and away from work that allows you time to think, reflect and gain perspective. And secondly, find a way to gain honest feedback. "The closer you go to the top, the less you will get feedback". And take a good hard look at what you have to do. Without the mental preparation or the ability to reflect, people can find leadership a very lonely place to be.



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