

LEADERS: THE GOOD THE BAD AND THE UGLY

Tanith Dodge is HR Director at Marks and Spencer. She was previously Group HR Director at W. H. Smith, HR Director for Europe, Middle East and Africa with Intercontinental Hotels Group and a division of Diageo. As well as leading important change initiatives in these organisations she has worked alongside many business leaders. We asked about her experiences and observations.

Who was the best leader you have ever worked with? What was it that this person did and achieved which made you rate them so highly?

Two people spring to mind for somewhat different reasons. One was a business leader in Diageo. He was able to create the vision and inspire people to understand their part in it. He knew that individuals needed different things in order to draw them into the vision. He took the time to understand what his key people needed in order to give their best. He was very open about his strengths, his development areas and where he needed support. He consistently gave out the same few key messages including the two crucial financial measures of success so everyone knew them and understood them. He created a “joined up” organisation where people really worked together and leveraged information.

The other was in the hotel industry. He recognised the need for dramatic change and saw the need for a coalition of people down the organisation to drive the change. Despite pressure to use the top down approach, he put together a coalition of people and encouraged them to make radical proposals for change. He trusted their recommendations and overall put them into action. Great courage and huge trust in the people he had selected. This leader was also very open with colleagues. I mean about his anxieties and concerns and people warmed to that at quite an emotional level. They recognised it took courage for such a senior person to disclose that. He was also obviously open to what other people wanted to say.

We will spare the blushes of individuals but where have some of the leaders you have seen tended to fall down?

The classic thing is they were quite good managers but didn't display enough ability as leaders.

They focused on managing the task, the results, and so on. But good people want to be led, not managed and what they never convinced people about was why should anybody follow them? It still surprises me that people like this get promoted into leadership roles.

Another fault was they just failed to grasp what people need. For example, feedback, coaching, some personal interest. It's not that complicated!

Much worse failures are those who play the political agenda. They seem to lack the integrity to live up to the expressed values of the organisation. For example, senior managers have to show their behaviour is aligned with that they are asking of others. You almost have to overplay the appropriate behaviours. If not you risk giving mixed messages to people in the heart of the organisation..

One consistent factor which seems to sort out the better from the poorer leaders I have known is self-awareness. If you don't continuously learn from life's

experiences and how they have affected you it is much less likely you will become a great leader.

You have a great track record as a senior leader from an HR base. Is there anything you think that leaders in HR/OD/Learning especially need to do in order to be effective?

I think that people often have a preconceived idea of what an HR leader is like. You are assumed to be better at the coaching, feedback, etc. than your colleagues. Therefore you have to be a strong example of all these things. At the same time you have to be able to link the people element of the organisation with the business strategy in a completely integrated and systemic way.

The other key challenge for an HR leader is to know when people are confiding in you just as a colleague and when what they really want is for you to represent their views to the CEO!

Interestingly I think it is often easier to get business leaders to see the link between people and the results than it is with many HR specialists. That's especially true if their experience has been in organisations where HR is not seen as an integral part of the business.

Tanith many thanks for sharing your experiences and observations.