



LEADERSHIP

Why good management isn't enough in today's firms

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Speakers: Nigel Knowles and Dr Peter Hawkins

Leadership is a topic that must have concerned humankind at least since the first woman or man proposed the outrageous innovation of living in a cave. It was perhaps not surprising then that so many MPF members should eagerly seek early morning shelter at the offices of DLA Piper in the hope of a good breakfast and learning all about leadership and management in no more time than it took for England to be led to defeat against Croatia. A write-up in under 1000 words can hardly be more than a partial selection of the tasters offered.

In opening, MPF chairman Nigel Knowles quipped: "One of the secrets about leadership is to cover up points you're not proud of". Was the man who has been at the forefront – leading or managing or both depending on your definition – of a law firm whose turnover grew from £60m to \$1bn in little over ten years suggesting that he might not be perfect? What hope for the rest of us then! But therein lay one of the central points about leadership on which both speakers would elaborate: leadership of change is not about omniscient perfection but the humility to asking questions and learn.

For Nigel Knowles, leadership was about creating a vision whereas management was about achieving a set of pre-determined objectives. One person can do both but would not always be best at both. And yet the two are inextricably linked because vision must be aligned with the management of all the elements of an organisation. Nigel illustrated the point by likening one of the DLA top-management team's early attempts at creating an aligned vision to that of Monty Python's sketch of the 100-yard dash for people with no sense of direction. Establishing a vision and alignment took time – and no doubt determination to see the firm through a rocky time of change.

The need for leadership is not confined to those at the top. Bringing all organisational elements into alignment required change from the incremental to the 'big bets'; innovation and responsibility for change were required at all levels. As Nigel sternly put it: "Those firms with partners who think that change is for someone else will not create or maintain competitive advantage".

If one of the qualities that determined what Jim Collins, author of *Built to Last*, termed 'Level 5 leaders' in his Harvard Business Review article (Jan-Feb 2001, p66), was humility it was also about the will to carry change through and that depends how you view change. To Nigel Knowles, "change is a friend because it enables you to maintain competitive advantage." As Dr Hawkins would say, leadership is an attitude, not a role.

So, Dr Hawkins asked, what sort of attitude and what sort of leadership is required to create alignment in today's world of professional services firms? He engaged the assembled company by inviting them to ask one another questions about leadership and how each would like to raise their game as leaders. One member's question struck a chord: on a scale of benevolent to democratic, where is the best place to be if you are to be successful as a leader? In other words, what is the right type of leadership in a large partnership so that leadership is distributed but with one shared aim? With this Dr

Hawkins began a 26-slide PowerPoint dash through leadership. Here are a few of his insights that stood out along the way.

Questions people ask in firms are often framed as closed – as a polarised either or – rather than open: “ If that is happening three times, you’re asking the wrong questions – but the needs behind polarised questions are important”.

Is it possible to learn to be a good leader? Yes, absolutely; we all have different capacities but Dr Hawkins had seen people transformed and we can learn leadership from mistakes. Leadership in complex multiple matrix-based firms, however, requires an emotional mix that few partners have: “IQ gets you recruited but EQ gets you promoted.” (That has a good ring about it but suggests Dr Hawkins is confident that those with the right level of EQ get to decide on the promotions!)

Good self-management is required, too, to create sufficient time. One exercise Dr Hawkins has carried out is to ask people in leadership positions to identify the 20% of tasks that created the least value: “We need to be radical weeders to become great gardeners.”

Leadership is about accepting responsibility for change, echoing the point about it being an attitude, not a role: “leadership begins when we stop blaming others or making excuses” - which was also a quote from (and happily a plug for) one of his several books, ‘The Wise Fool’s Guide to Leadership’. Or, as Ghandi had put it more than 60 years ago, “You must be the change you want to see in the world”.

Leadership requires winning the hearts and minds of their people. Facebook-loving Generation Y, in particular, “want to be engaged with relationship not be managed through tasks” (quoting Professor Lynda Gratton, London Business School). Leaders do not have management levers at their command but must learn to influence change. Leaders should, therefore, Dr Hawkins admonished, “pay less attention to content and more to intent”; consider less about the information you are imparting than how you want your audience to *feel*.

Indeed. For anyone feeling that the dash through the morning’s insightful content left them with unanswered questions, buy the book!