

When did you become a leader?

I don't ever remember becoming a leader. I mean officially. You could say: somebody must have made you a Manager or Managing Director or something and hence you were a leader by default! Yes sure, but I'm going back further.

I possibly was a leader when I was a teenager and not of my local Boy Scout team that would have been much too scary and intimidating. No, I think I was a leader of, what we use to call and still do in some parts of the world, Gastarbeiter ('foreign workers' or 'immigrant workers'). My family business was a tannery in Germany for fine garment and shoe leather that is now in the 10th generation. I remember, as though it was yesterday, that my father had the habit of going into the factory at 6 am almost every morning shouting and screaming his head off about every little thing that wasn't right in his eyes. He did it mainly to create an atmosphere of fear for the rest of the day and maybe he had even hoped to gain respect that way, I don't know? (I have never discussed it with him and even 40 years later we still don't talk about business). All I know is I hated the way my father talked with 'his' people and I felt incredibly sorry because they tried so hard and knew if they said something they might be fired.

So, at the age of 13 or 14 I frequently use to go down to the factory when they started at 05.30 to talk with them, to check all was done that could have been done but mainly to reassure them that my father's screaming didn't mean anything and they shouldn't think about it too much, he is just silly. I was basically undermining my father; I was an early union leader in disguise I guess. Looking back I see that early experience as a lesson of how not to be with people if you want to be a leader.

What does being a leader mean to you?

I can't draw though I love to buy and collect paintings; I can't read music or play an instrument but I love listening to all sorts of music particularly anyone from the Bach family; I can't string a sentence together in public unless I read it or prepare months in advance but I love theatre, film or good literature.

The only thing I am truly gifted with is being dyslexic. I know this is a rather weird thing to say and to admit to and what does it have to do with being a leader you may ask? I have led sizable, international businesses with well over 800 employees; I had MDs, FCs and many other important roles reporting into me. But, for me to be effective as a dyslexic person, to get anything done, I need to delegate, I need to empower others, I need to trust others, I need to find complementary skills in my team to operate the big 'ship'. So I basically don't do anything at all and it all works fabulously.

OK, I take some credit for creating an atmosphere in which all that talent can flower and I might say yes or no to some things from time to time but that's all!

I am always, again and again so overwhelmed by how much people are prepared to offer and give if you let them, if you value them and if you recognise it.

What do you like and dislike about your leadership role?

There is nothing I dislike about being a leader because I couldn't imagine, not for a moment, not being a leader or not wanting to be a leader. No, not leading wouldn't be an option. I mean, if worse

comes to worse I could always lead myself. No, I think that would be a disaster too because I wouldn't listen to any of what I had to say. I don't even get out of bed when I tell myself to get up.....

No, joking aside, I just love it!

What was my most profound experience as a Leader?

Obviously, writing for the Alumni newsletter, I would say the 'Friday Night Feedback Session' when I attended the Leadership in Management was my most profound experience. And yes, it was very profound! I still have my notes from the early 90s on my file and look at them from time to time. But, the most profound experience and the one I have taken to heart for the rest of my life, was many years later and funnily enough also at the Leadership Trust.

The company I was heading up was a medium size business with about 250 people, a tightly knit team. All of my Directors, Managers and most Team Leaders had been exposed to the teachings of The Trust. Our business had just been through a couple of years of aggressive acquisitions and takeovers; we grew from 250 employees to a PLC division with over 800 employees but, with the top team still in place as it always was. (Except everybody had taken on a different positions by now, plus we had a Chairman and a group FC)

Bi-annual personal reviews with 360 degree feedback were the new thing of the 90s at least to us and as we were the top team we vowed to lead by example and start this review process rolling.

We rented space at The Leadership Trust, had our annual financial review session and tucked on to that our own personal reviews. (This session by the way was chaired by a Trust Tutor)

What was so profound?

Well, my feedback was that I had changed; I was different; I was short fused; I didn't compliment some of my Team members on their different achievements as I use to do in the past; why had I not noticed a change in atmosphere amongst the team?

I was shocked and horrified because all of what was said was not how I wanted to be as a leader. I failed to take stock of what went on inside me, something utterly inexcusable! With hindsight and in fact as soon as it was pointed out so bluntly I knew exactly what went on.

We were all extremely busy, time had taken on a different meaning, the vision for the business had changed dramatically, my and / or our salaries and bonus packages had changed; VWs were exchanged for BMWs except I kept my VW out of principle but I think, I for one, became possibly slightly arrogant as a result of it all.

I started to ignore the elementary of leadership; ignored the people around me; took for granted the very people who have to be an example to their teams and so on. I suddenly realised how quickly all of what we had built up through hard work and thoughtful planning including our values as a 'responsible' business could just collapse around us like a pack of cards.

Were it not for my colleagues who understood effective upward leadership this could have happened. Lucky for me, that my team was not afraid of putting their leader back onto the path of reality by holding a mirror up to my face.

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