

Mapping the leaders' DNA

The resounding success of the human genome project has given Dr Leandro Herrero some ambitious ideas of his own. Here he outlines his cunning plan to locate and patent the elusive leadership gene

If we could apply genomics to the discovery of leaders' genetic codes, I suspect many organisations would happily pay the fee. I recently asked a headhunter what his clients' main requirements were these days, and he didn't hesitate: leadership qualities. However, when asked: "But what exactly do they mean?" he struggled to come up with a universal answer. Everybody uses the phrase, but it doesn't always have the same meaning. Charismatic leadership has become unfashionable because it sounds too much like an army general shouting marching orders, and because a fair amount of organisational research tells us many successful companies are in fact led by largely unappealing leaders; often dull, in many cases almost invisible, at least to the external world. However, try writing the brief for your next employee as if you were looking for an uncharismatic leader: "I don't want anybody charming, fascinating, or magnetic... just plain simple dull vanilla." See how that makes you feel.

There is a whole industry on leadership. It spreads from academic research on character quality to weekend mountain-climbing tuition; from psychosocial studies on the characteristics of leaders and followers to the 'seven rules of leadership in a nutshell'; from research on what has worked and what hasn't in organisations to 'become-a-leader-and-let-everybody-else-do-the-work' style of coaching. The business supermarket shelves are full of leadership stuff. As in many areas of management, it's pick 'n' mix.

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When you put together all the attributes found in successful leaders, you quickly reach a conclusion: short of walking on water (a leadership quality neatly demonstrated by Jesus), anything goes. It's probably safe to say that what has worked in one instance will not necessarily work in another and, similarly, what has worked before may not work now. Pretty gloomy for lovers of a predictable world.

Jack Welch, ex-CEO of General Electric, transformed the company by playing different roles at different times and working from different scripts depending on the circumstances. Universally hailed by the management industry, he left behind two things: a firm with question-marks over its accounting system (which for years produced the numbers, which produced the publicity, which produced the success) and question-marks over his personal behaviour. Yet the only casualties seem to have been an editor of *Harvard Business Publishing* and an expensive divorce – not exactly historical events.

Welch was the prototype of so-called 'contingency leadership', which at its extreme means the

leader does whatever it takes to lead, even if this means changing his behaviour and any value system behind it. Which is what Welch did. But the Welch leadership style can't be applied as an off-the-shelf solution. Leaders looking for behavioural clues should spend more time studying the social sciences and less reading CEOs' biographies.

Many management thinkers and serious scholars of leadership dare to say the unpopular: leadership can't be taught, period. I agree. But that shouldn't prevent us exploring ideas, watching leaders, making judgments, and even trying some methodologies. If a leader is something one becomes (which is different from being taught, in the way you can be taught finance) the question is, what journey should you take to get there? In this context, let me offer my own simplistic decoding of leaders' DNA. Here are five propositions:

1. Leaders become; dictators arrive. Leadership is something you earn, which means somebody must give it to you, which means there are followers. You can be my boss, my dictator, my inquisitor or my king by decree. You can only be my leader when I say so and I ask you, and, incidentally, I would be grateful if you'd accept the role. Leaders are sometimes next door. Sometimes they are your bosses; sometimes they live in remote lands – you'll never see them, and they will still lead you. My prototype leader is a man of thought, whose own thinking is evolving all the time. He does not have all the answers. As a matter of fact, if he did, he would be unqualified for the job.

2. Leaders provide meaning, sometimes referred to as 'context'. It's not about words, plans and grandiose aspirations, although there is nothing wrong with those; it's mainly about providing some sense in an un-common sense world. They explain the significance of things; of journeys, of goals, of what the future may mean for you. They are good storytellers and they can help you visualise a future. A technique I use (and I don't claim original thinking) is called 'visualising failure'. Imagine four years from now standing in front of your organisation, or the Board, or investors, and saying: "Remember that vision and those goals? We didn't make it, it didn't happen. We screwed up. Now, explain why, create your own script." The results are always revealing. When confronted with your own semi-apocalyptic script, your mind rapidly switches to see how to avoid these things happening. Leaders aren't just storytellers, but scriptwriters, too. My kind of leader is a translator of the grandiose into everyday slang.

3. Leaders are firstly cartographers, then explorers, and then fellow travellers. They provide maps; not physical maps but mental maps. As for the destination, some have a pretty good idea and some don't, neither of which makes them automatically good or



Illustration by Rob Wilcockson

The features of a good leader aren't instantly recognisable.

bad leaders. A particularly clear idea of a point of arrival (defined in terms of financial success, market share or market leadership) may become a liability if strategy becomes mere mantra. If the leader tries to reach the arrival point at any cost, he may not see alternatives on the way. A cynical friend of mine says that when point of destiny and size of the stock options are linked, some managers get 'a bit confused' about the differences between the two.

Leaders, in my book of DNA decoding, care a lot about 'the way of doing', as opposed to let's-get-there-no-matter-how leaders, who can be apparently successful but at enormous social cost.

Western management culture favours 'destination-driven journeys'. Eastern management culture favours journey-led destinations – how you get there is at least as important as getting there. My prototype leader may turn out to be a frustrated map-maker and, who knows, may have something of that in his DNA.

4. Leaders speak an invitational language. They present data or ideas not coldly but as an invitation to join in, to understand, to follow. Speeches are not statements of fact or intentions but an actionable account of life. Come in, let's go, move, join in, like it, hate it, react, be alive, they seem to say. My prototype leader is not neutral, does not intend to be objective, is passionate (which is not the same as evangelical bellowing) and is impossible to ignore.

5. Leaders are keepers and carers of the mental wellbeing of others and the organisation. They are aware of corporate pathologies and they try to prevent them. Donald Sull wrote an article worth reading in the *Harvard Business Review* (1999) entitled 'Why good companies go bad'. He describes four 'dynamics of failure': strategic frames can become blinders; processes may become routines; relationships may become shackles; and values may become dogma. Leaders understand the value of organisational mental health and try to avoid going down these avenues. They themselves may have been the generators of strategic frames, the facilitators of new exciting processes or change programmes, the gluers of people or the value-setters, but, perhaps with the exception of the latter, they have a great ability not to take things or themselves too seriously. My prototype leader has something in his DNA that has to do with personal humility and detachment mixed with passion for an idea or cause.

Leaders also have different faces, all of them equally important:

- What they do. This behavioural starting-point is always fascinating. Years ago I was involved in a dis-

ussion on this topic, saying that what interested me most was what leaders 'thought' (of reality, of organisations, of themselves). Half way into the conversation with a group of highly intelligent people, somebody raised a question which stopped all of us: "But what exactly do they do?" she asked, taking us to a more prosaic and productive reality.

- What they say. Rhetoric, language, words, matters. I have referred before to 'invitational' rhetoric. Many organisations are stuck on something (strategy, process improvement, change) because they do not possess the 'language'. Leaders provide it and use it. Although rhetoric in itself is often dismissed unless it's actionable, sometimes 'actions' are not immediate and the rhetoric provides a framework for that action to take place.

- What they build. Leaders are builders of organisations. First they build purpose, and then they build places. Places to be, to enhance people, to work in, to navigate through life. The building of organisations is behaviour-shaping. To paraphrase what Winston Churchill said about houses, we build organisations and then organisations shape us.

- What they care about. I have referred before to values and beliefs. Finding this face of the leader is not difficult because what they care about informs their language and behaviour. See what he says, observe what he does, see if it matches and you will discover the value system behind it.

- How they do it. Caring about how things happen is prominent in many leaders. The 'how' is always seen in our culture as a 'detail' or a 'by-product'. Good leaders don't see it like that – the way things are done matters to them.

- What they are. This is the most difficult face to understand. Perhaps the best way to start is to refer to the famous line in *The Book of the Fathers* (Talmud): "If you don't look after yourself, who will?" That's the first step. It might sound pretty selfish so far, but it's enormously healthy because it prompts independence from others (from the systems, from the company, from the organisation, from the boss). Here's the second step: "If you only look after yourself, what are you?" It's a powerful question; note the 'what', not 'who'. "What am I?" is probably the most important question, dealing with how we handle our life navigation system. Now for the third and last step: "If not now, when?" Take it as a slogan for your next bring-some-sense-of-urgency-here workshop.

These six faces overlap and move – sometimes they're difficult to grasp. As I said, I'm investigating the possibility of launching the Leadership Genomics Project, when all will be decoded, all triggers explained, all behaviour predicted. Once I have finished, I will sell the CD-ROM to the headhunters. SM

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