

Why is personal development important for senior people?

One of the things I have always enjoyed about my work is the opportunity to meet people from a variety of organisations and find out how they work, what challenges they face and how they deliver results. From time to time, I find these discussions reveal common themes and questions that affect businesses in all industry sectors. These can be general principles, such as the endless debate about to evaluate 'soft skills' training and demonstrate its value in terms of measurable return on investment (that's one for another day) or they can be issues about the development of particular professions or target audiences. Recently, I've been talking to a lot of HR professionals about the development of Directors and Senior Managers. Traditionally, this is a section of most organisations where development is dominated by commercially-focused business school programmes and limited by the busy schedules of the target audience. It's rare to include Directors or Senior Managers in personal development programmes, partly because there is an assumption that they must be confident, positive and goal-focused already, or else they wouldn't have achieved a Senior Management position! Sometimes it's also partly because it is feared that the presence of a Senior Manager on a personal development programme will inhibit the participation of more junior colleagues. Either way, the net result is that Directors and Senior Managers are encouraged to work on their business skills rather than their life skills.

In many of my recent discussions I've been advocating a change of attitude. A question we keep coming back to is 'How do we deliver another increase in profit this year when we've solved all the obvious problems, upgraded our systems and everything seems to be running smoothly? How do we keep on delivering improvements?' There are many people skilled in the arts of continuous improvement who would have a ready answer to that question and I would bow to their superior knowledge of those techniques. I would also offer a rather different answer: Leadership development.

People don't leave jobs – they leave bosses

A few years ago a study conducted by the Centre for Creative Leadership found (amongst other things) that when a person leaves their job more often than not it's because they are unhappy with their boss. To put

it another way, people don't leave jobs, they leave bosses. The reason a person leaves a boss is often because that boss lacks the leadership skill to engage the person with the task or simply lacks the interpersonal skills to communicate effectively. This results in staff lacking motivation for the task, failing to appreciate its importance or feeling that they themselves are not valued. Now, you may be thinking that this is a problem that only really applies at junior and middle management levels. Surely the people who achieve senior positions must have good leadership skills, good interpersonal skills and the ability to communicate effectively? I think it's a reasonable assumption that Senior Managers, in general, have more of those kinds of skills than their junior colleagues. I think it's also true that they need a far greater level of leadership ability because of the positions they hold. A level of skill that many of them have not had an opportunity to develop.

So the next question is, 'How do we develop leadership skills at the top of the organisation?' Most Directors and Senior Managers would, quite rightly, be a bit offended if you suggested they attend the same leadership training as that offered to people taking up a leadership role for the first time. They probably did that training, or something like it, years ago and have put into practice as much as was useful to them on the way up the organisation. At that level, a lot of training is focused around behaviour and skills that have been shown to be effective in team leadership and influence. Our senior people need more than that. They need something that makes the difference between a good senior manager and truly inspirational leader.

Inspirational leadership

It would be easy to say that some things are God-given and leadership ability is one of them. But being an NLP Trainer and therefore an advocate of modelling excellence I would have to disagree. My own observation and research into leadership suggests that the best leaders, the ones we would follow to the ends of the earth (metaphorically speaking), are the ones who have personal congruence. That's a bit of NLP jargon that simply means they are whole-hearted about what they're doing. No doubts, no misgivings, no secondary agenda and therefore no mixed messages, no lack of

enthusiasm, just a clear direction that they obviously totally believe in. This is at the heart of what is often labelled 'charisma'. That rare quality that makes you want to listen what someone says, makes you want to follow their lead, makes you want to work with them. Charisma is often cited as a quality of great leaders. And having arrived at this conclusion some people will heave a sigh of relief and say 'you can't teach people charisma', therefore you can't teach them to be great leaders.

No, you can't teach charisma, because you can't teach personal congruence, but a person who addresses their doubts, misgivings and internal conflicts can achieve personal congruence and so achieve that elusive leadership quality that will make them stand out from the crowd and inspire others to follow their lead. The route to personal congruence is personal development. If you want to be a better leader, work on yourself.

The reason this is so important with senior people in organisations is that they can influence so many people, for good or ill. They are very visible and any tiny mistake they make has the potential to affect behaviour, attitudes, mood and morale. If they're not sure about a course of action, no-one will follow their lead. If they talk about the corporate vision and their body language suggests that they think it's unrealistic, people will see their hesitation rather than the vision.

Think about it. If I'm a Director of a company and I've never quite persuaded myself that I'm a good public speaker that could mean that every time I have to present to the company conference I appear unconvinced and unconvincing. A lost opportunity to influence the whole organisation. Suppose I'm a Senior Manager and I dislike 'small talk'. It could mean that I avoid social gatherings with staff and never get involved in general chatter. People might think that I'm not interested in them, that I don't value them and therefore will be reluctant to give their best. What if I'm the MD and I have a bad temper that I keep under control most of the time, but occasionally...

I could go on, I've met a lot of these people and few of them are perfect. Sadly, their unforgiving employees expect them to be and flaws in senior people can translate into flaws in the performance of their staff.

Now for the good news. A person who works on themselves and addresses the causes of those incongruences will quite quickly experience the benefits. Quite small, quite subtle changes in the behaviour of one person can spark changes in the behaviour of many others. Quite small, quite subtle changes in the behaviour of a senior manager or director can create confidence in the minds of their

staff. That confidence can translate into improved performance.

At a time when many industry sectors are facing a future where the only source of sustainable competitive advantage is in people and their skills, isn't it time that the most senior of those people are encouraged to invest in themselves and develop their abilities to engage, to inspire and to lead?

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