

Great leaders are powerful and controlling personalities, right? Not so, says leadership coach Philomena Hayward - understanding the people you are leading is what will ultimately make them follow

What makes an effective leader? It is one of those eternally popular questions asked by workplace leaders and behavioural academics alike.

When I work with housing associations, people often cite figures such as Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher as ideal leaders. However, a recent report published by the not-for-profit organisation The Work Foundation challenges the old assumption that leaders need to be strong, powerful personalities with a controlling, target-driven approach.

Based on a two-year study involving more than 250 in-depth interviews with senior managers and their colleagues, the report, *Exceeding expectation: the principles of outstanding leadership*, argues that leaders should take a more subtle and people-centred approach, especially during tough economic times.

People first

Rather than an organisation's staff being one in a series of priorities, the emphasis is on placing them at the top of the agenda. If you get relationships working effectively, that dynamic will, in turn, bring about the desired results, and to a higher level than that proscribed by targets.

The researchers were able to differentiate between good and outstanding leaders. So, for example, a good leader recognises that people and tasks are important; an outstanding leader puts people at the centre, and sees that any task's success is likely to depend on the attitude of the people carrying it out.

The report concludes that there are three core 'organising principles' which sum up the qualities of outstanding leaders.

So what kind of leadership characterises what we see in the world of business - good or outstanding? As a leadership coach, I work with clients in the private corporate sector across a number of sectors as well as within social housing.

A mini-poll I've conducted among colleagues and clients suggests there are patches of effective - and in some cases outstanding - leadership to be found. There are still organisations, though, that run on a control and task-focused basis, where the importance of targets rather than the people that meet them is emphasised.

One client, referring to leaders, said that 'control freakery is in the nature of the beast'. Another felt that perhaps there was an age factor at play, and that younger leaders were more likely to be more self-aware and have a more nuanced understanding of what leads to sustained change.

Self-awareness

Becoming an outstanding leader comes from self-awareness, particularly being more conscious of how you affect and influence others.

If you have a greater understanding of what makes you tick, this enables you to better understand what motivates and rewards others.

A greater level of personal awareness leads to a self-confidence that helps to cultivate the atmosphere of openness and honesty needed to build trust.

One chief executive I worked with recently was 'having problems' with an employee whom she perceived wasn't getting results on a new initiative.

By thinking through her own effect on the situation, she was able to see that she had not been as involved as she should have been. In turn, she had transferred her disappointment in herself onto the member of staff.

In this instance, the chief executive openly discussed the issue in question with the individual concerned. The upshot was that both of them were able to resolve the matter. What's more, though, the encounter meant they were able to strengthen their day-to-day working relationship.

However many people you manage, becoming an outstanding leader is simply good business sense. One of the great things about housing is that the organisations within it are there for the long run. That offers an opportunity to think about personal development that can be undertaken over time and made to last.

Philomena Hayward is director of Hayward Development Partnership. She has more than 20 years' experience as a leadership coach.

Outstanding leaders

...Think and act systemically

They see things as a whole rather than compartmentalising them. They connect the parts by using a guiding sense of purpose. They understand that mutual gains create loyalty and commitment, how confidence provides a springboard to motivation and creativity, and how trust speeds interactions and enables people to take personal risks and succeed.

...See people as the route to performance

They are deeply people and relationship centred rather than just people-oriented. They give significant amounts of time and focus to people.

...Are self-confident without being arrogant

They are highly motivated to achieve excellence and are focused on organisational outcomes, vision and purpose. They understand they cannot create performance themselves, rather, they are conduits to performance through their influence on others. Their key tools are not systems and processes, but themselves and the ways they interact with and affect those around them. This sense of self is not ego-driven; it is to serve a goal, creating a combination of humility and self-confidence. This is why they watch themselves carefully and act consistently to achieve excellence through their interactions and through their embodiment of the leadership role.

Source: The Work Foundation