

Experience Matters

empowering the 50+

Mike is a recently retired partner of a major accounting firm who now has a portfolio of public and private sector roles where his experience can add value.

Leading Teams

Many great leaders have been very young- Alexander the Great and the Duke of Wellington come to mind. However, great young leaders always knew that they needed advice from those with experience. We also know that in normal everyday activities, what is needed is effective leadership of relatively small teams- in the office, in the supermarket and so on. There are many qualities that experience can harness to make us effective leaders- and that experience is made up of us seeing good and bad practice and learning by own individual experiences. As with Strategy, there are many books on leadership and in fact I do enjoy reading them and each one I have read has made me aware of big and little things that I hope have made me better at leading teams. I want to look at just three aspects of leadership that I think age helps to put into effective practice.

I think it will surprise no-one that the first big lesson experience teaches leaders is that it is essential to communicate with your team. What I mean here is keeping your team informed about how things are going, giving them a clear sense of direction and most important of all, listening to them. I am sure we can all think of so many examples of when people have said – ‘ I did not know that’ , or ‘ nobody tells the anything’, or ‘nobody listens to me’. In fact I think this whole area is summed up by what has happened in British politics in the last year. We were furious that MPs apparently did not want us to know what they had been getting up to and the public’s reaction has been summed up many times on TV programmes by the phrase –‘they just do not listen’.

In the work place or in fact in any organised activity, communication takes many forms but what you know is that you must tell your people all that you know and treat them like adults. I can remember many years ago noting a lesson that I learnt on a leadership course which was that all our people knew as much as I did about what was going on and hence if I did not tell them all that I knew, they were quick to spot it.

Listening is in many ways the harder especially when we are busy but whet experience tells us is that if one of our team wants to tell us something, we

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simply have to make the time to listen. And of course that means using our skills to give feedback about what we hear. Our people will only know that we have listened if they get some feedback that shows that we have understood what they are saying. Of course the key then is to commit to action and follow it through, even if the action is to disagree with what you have heard.

This leads straight to my second aspect which is about style. We learn that we are task or people centred and so on but what we have to learn is that leading teams is not about being liked - it is about people's respect so that they will give you their discretionary effort. When I was younger, it took me a while to realise that if I tried to be nice all the time and be popular it achieved the opposite. As a leader I was part of the team but not a trooper, my team had to follow me and do what we as a team were committed to do and sometimes that meant making sacrifices- working late when we did not want to or taking on tasks that in an ideal world we would prefer not to. That is where the team have to respect your judgement and follow your lead.

I had a manager who worked for me for some years who wanted to be one of the troops and always defended his team even when their performance was not up to scratch on the basis that he wanted to be liked. His team did not respect him; he did not deal with the poor performers or in fact acknowledge those who were making the biggest contribution. He ended up leaving and being replaced by a harder more balanced person who was able to make that team perform so much better. I can hear you say that I must have been a pretty lousy leader if I could not get him to perform better. I did try but sometimes it does not work out and you change the team. In this particular case it was better for the team and it turned out better for the manager as he discovered he was much better suited to self employment where he could use his technical skills but did not have to supervise a team of people.

My third leadership skill is the recognition that really good performing teams are a mixture of skills and types of people. Experience teaches you that teams are made up of different people who come together for a common goal. The most obvious example is in sport where there are clear differences in skill between forwards and backs but you also need a range of personality types for the team to gel. This realisation came to me when I struggled as a youngster to understand what role I had in teams because I was never the best but did have the luck of being in some good teams. I was in my thirties before I discovered about team types and why different types are needed to make the team really work. A real benefit of this realisation was that I was part

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of a rather varied group and we discovered that although we were all different we each had distinct and valuable roles to play. As a leader I was able to use this knowledge to learn how to get good results out of teams with sometimes not the best individual performers but with the right mix of personalities. Moreover I think this knowledge helps you to help team members appreciate each other and hence improve their performance.

Leading teams is definitely an area where experience matters and we know it. What we have to do is to remember these skills in whatever role we now have. Then the team we are leading or are part of will deliver far better results for the team and our own individual benefit. In fact the real benefit of adopting good leadership skills in whatever area we are in is that things are just so much more fun if the team works well together.

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