

## IT SHOULD BE YOU

It's no good seeing leadership as an intellectual task. Nope. It's not as simple as saying 'learn these skills, read this book, put these ingredients together, and you'll be successful'. You've got to put your back into it – and your heart. You've got to sweat, feel the pain and share the load. This time it really is personal.

Whatever your function, grade or expertise, if you're not feeling every bump in your company's road to success – if it doesn't feel like this is your own business, your own money, your own set-back and your own glittering success – then you're not taking leadership personally – or seriously – enough.

In recent work with a number of organisations, I have heard the phrase 'something should be done' a remarkable number of times. But whoever it is that should be doing it doesn't seem aware of the fact. Sorry, we say, you haven't got that quite right. If something should be done, what exactly are you doing about it?

We all have it in us to be leaders. Even when we don't have the role at work, we often use the capability elsewhere – at home, in our leisure activities, in emergency situations or in the supermarket queue. The big thing about leadership is that it requires us to take personal responsibility for our own actions, and for those of the people we lead.

After all, the task of leadership is



Whatever level they work at, good leaders can't help but get stuck in. **Lyn Bicker** explains why it's up to every one of us to take the strain if we really want to succeed

to lead people towards something – the groundbreaking new product idea, the brilliant execution of strategy, the difficult but necessary implementation of big change. And when things go wrong, when pilots fail, funding disappears or soul-destroying restructuring has to happen, leaders are the people whose careers are not protected from the consequences, but have to take things on the chin. It's risky.

Senior managers need to develop a commitment to risking their careers, if they are to become effective leaders. Worryingly, CIPD did some research earlier this year that identified an apparent shortage of effective leaders in the UK – some 65% of the companies surveyed thought this was the case, and 85% of them were investing in leadership development.

### PASSING THE BUCK

We evidently want leadership, we need it, we understand that staying still effectively means going backwards and we're not really happy with the leadership we have today – but clearly we'd rather someone else picks up the baton. Something needs to be done, but who's going to do it?

If I asked you when you were last proud of how you acted, what would you say? I just bet it was when you took charge of something, when you decided something needed to be done, and that you were the one to do it. If I'm right, and you can replicate that behaviour at work, then you're

on your way from manager to leader. According to Harvard Business School's leadership expert, John Kotter, effective leadership is about setting direction and coping with change, and managing is about bringing a degree of order and consistency. Few people really make the choice to 'do something about it' in the corporate world (at least not unless they've covered their own backs first). It's too risky, too uncomfortable.

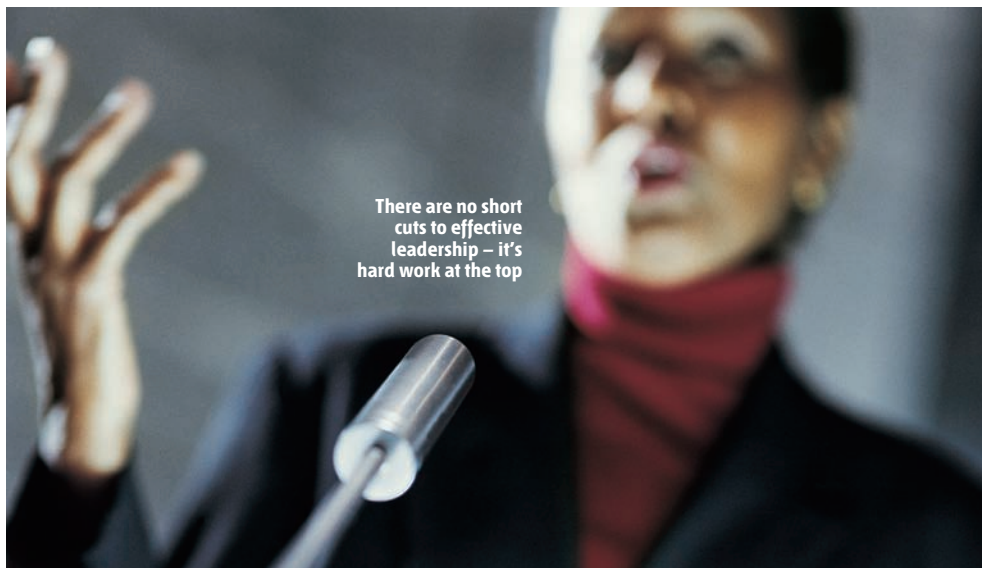
Really bold leadership, the kind that is about betting the whole shop on one decision, doesn't get much of a look-in with our current emphasis on justification and evidence-based direction setting. Being a leader, taking that responsibility, somehow seems a lot less attractive when you have to be accountable, which of course as a leader you do.

In my coaching practice, I work with lots of senior people who have suddenly been thrust into the leadership limelight, taking on new roles or responsibilities. They are nervous, thrilled, committed and fully understand the enormity of their task. And they need some help to stay on the case, to work through the difficult issues as well as claim the obvious wins. To make the uncomfortable choices.

I've been told I don't let people off the hook when I'm coaching – and, frankly, that's my job. Sure, not everyone has that external source of encouragement when tough decisions have to be made, but either way, it's ultimately down to you to find the personal strength, the sheer grit and the determination it takes to be a business or organisational leader.

It's your challenge to make sure that something changes for the better as a result of your leadership. Next time you find yourself thinking 'something should be done' it's time for you to step forward and take responsibility for making it happen. Yep, this time it really is personal. ■

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There are no short cuts to effective leadership – it's hard work at the top