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“WHAT GOT YOU HERE WON’T GET YOU THERE” or
“SOME OF WHAT GOT YOU HERE WILL GET YOU THERE!”

by Roger Colmer

This article and the observations are based on reading the intriguing thoughts of Marshall Goldsmith on the attributes needed to grow one’s career and how behaviour needs to change over time. I fully support the ideas of Marshall in suggesting that the behaviours which help bring you to a certain stage in your career may not be the ones needed for further progression. To quote an old adage, “If you always do what you always did, you will always get what you always got.” However some of the things that “got you here” may well be those which will bring you further. I will illustrate my views through my own experience in the international oil and gas business.

The toughest “management” role in the world is typically that of first time, front line Supervisor. You will probably have been part of a team, done well, exhibited talent and potential and thus given the opportunity to take that first step on the management ladder. To step outside a team and to then be seen as part of the management structure (“them”) is a frequently levelled observation. In that first time Supervisor role you need to be able to acknowledge that it does feel different and that you may have to exercise judgements and support decisions which perhaps you are not fully in agreement with. This behaviour of collegiate expression is extremely important. No Supervisor should ever say, “Of course I don’t agree with the Department Head; however, we have to do it.” Have the conversation in private, not in public.

The skills learnt in that front line role should form the solid foundation on which you will build your career. You will have to be able to shoulder the responsibility of the role and also to taste that sense of loneliness of leadership—you may not be popular! Building emotional courage is critical to future success. You will have to deal with performance issues, staff development, discipline and a host of new challenges. The courage of leadership is something which needs to be expanded and reinforced at each successive higher level of responsibility. I would suggest that this cannot be taught. You have to feel it and in an ideal world have a mentor with whom you can frame the issues and test the validity of decisions and the judgements made. For me this is one of those traits which will stay with you throughout your management/leadership career and does not change. It does however take on greater importance.

Being in a managerial or leadership role will test your resolve. There may be situations at any points in one career where there is a potential major conflict between what the organisation is requesting and the value system of the individual. A key question for all in positions of responsibility is to ask, “What are the three things I would resign for?” You have to know where the line is and when you would walk away. Interestingly the three things are mostly ethical and moral; not, if I was given a 10% pay cut or asked to do another role. Having the strength to exercise this judgement comes with time and needs to be developed.

A great deal of research has been carried out to examine what traits employees most admire in their boss. The table below lists some in no particular order. I have made a judgement as to my ranking—*only for my top five*.

ATTRIBUTE	ROGER’S RANKING
Showing enthusiasm	
Supporting other people	
Recognise individual effort	
Listening to individuals’ ideas and problems	
Provide direction	2
Demonstrate personal integrity/honesty	1
Practise what he/she preached	
Encourage teamwork	
Actively encourage feedback	
Develop other people	5
Promote other people’s self esteem	
Seek to understand before making judgments	
Treat mistakes as learning opportunities	
Give people doing the work the power to make decisions	3
Encourage new ways of doing things	
Promote understanding of the key issues	
Looking at possible future challenges	
Agree targets	
Take decisions	4
Minimise anxiety	

The leadership and management literature is full of lists similar to this—see Appendix 1 for another example. However many of the traits people most admired are fairly consistent, and I would suggest those which an individual would not wish to change on their journey up the Leadership ladder. Building reputation, whether for a Company or an individual is done by the teaspoon, destroying it is done by the bucket load. In other words it takes time to gain credibility for people to know, appreciate and understand your strengths and those areas where you need to improve. It is interesting to reflect on how this building of credibility (Authentic Leadership, as Bob Terry calls it) may not be too appealing to “Generation Y” who are much more short term focused. Perhaps it is useful to look back at the great Artists who often had a long apprenticeship before they were recognised for their talent.

What does need to change?

In many organisations people in the early part of their career specialise and become known and respected for a particular skill. In the oil and gas industry this might be skills and knowledge gained and applied as a Reservoir Engineer. In many technical roles analytical ability, numeracy and communication are skills embedded in the position. There is a tendency to believe, without too much testing, that the excellent “technician” will also make a good leader and manager. This debate has been around for many years and in general it is acknowledged that a direct correlation is not necessarily true. As staff move from a technical

roles to more leadership, other skills must be developed. In this aspect I fully agree with Marshall Goldsmith.

Whilst there are good opportunities for developing leaders to learn about the theory and tools of leadership and management, the real training comes from experience and opportunities. Ask yourself the question, “What was the most valuable learning experience I have ever had?” I can guarantee it was not sitting in a classroom listening to a lecture on Leadership! The exposure to new opportunities must be supported with coaching and mentoring. The more senior people in the organisation will also have to accept that the journeyman, at whatever stage of their career, will make mistakes. Creating an artificial environment or pretending that mistakes are unacceptable is fantasy. However in roles which have a very high safety element, the management of safety and protection of facilities must be the priority. The statement should be, “OK to make mistakes, however, don’t hurt anyone, don’t jeopardise Shareholder value, and protect reputation.”

One of the key areas which does need to change as an individual progresses up the seniority route is the development of emotional intelligence and a mental toughness especially dealing with major incidents. In the oil and gas industry the risk of a major catastrophe is never far away. When accidents happen they frequently have serious consequences. (That said, the industry does have a good overall record; one is safer working in the offshore business than in agriculture in the UK. Data: UK Health and Safety Executive.) The industry’s most severe single incident was the Piper Alpha disaster in the North Sea in July 1988. The subsequent official investigation led by Lord Cullen resulted in many changes to the business. Note: The report is extremely well written and highly recommended. He takes a tragic and emotional incident and makes sense in a very straightforward fashion.

As a Leader you may be confronted by a serious incident and no matter how much simulation training and contingency planning has been done, that moment when the death of an employee, for whom you are accountable, stares you in the face it is very different. In the UK legislation was introduced recently under the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide act 2007 making prosecution of an individual in an organisation much more likely. Everyone likes the benefits and positives of high office, however deep consideration must be given to developing the mental attitude to handle the tough times. You will receive little “training” for these tough situations and therefore need to develop different skills as you progress.

Leadership style. As one moves from managing small groups to managing large diverse groups then indeed, as pointed out by Marshall Goldsmith, new skills and approaches are needed. When supervising with the bounds of one’s own knowledge it is tempting and easy to be recognised as highly skilled. When managing large organisations by definition there will be many specialist roles for which you have no skill or experience. In these situations the skills of asking good questions, of listening and exercising intellectual curiosity are vital. Reflect on the following: People know how smart you are by the answers you give, they know how wise you are by the questions you ask.

Conclusion.

In summary, yes you will need to acquire new skills as your career grows, however it is also essential to identify those innate traits which are *your* personality and will stay with you—even after you have retired!

Appendix 1.

DESIRABLE TRAITS, IN REVERSE ORDER.

20. Patience – A good leader needs to show their employees that they’re willing to give them as much time as necessary to see them perform. A manager who roughly attaches arbitrary deadlines onto tasks and aggressively chases employees up will only antagonise and stress their workforce. Good leadership is about waiting as well as acting.

19. Continuous Development – Smart people have always sought out useful learning material that will help them along the path to happiness and leadership.

18. Graft – A brilliant leadership trait is the trait of grafting. There’s a simple rule that most good leaders follow: Always do the nastiest job yourself. While being able to delegate dire tasks to others is one of the perks of management, it is important that employees never actually question your dedication to work hard. By simply doing the famously nasty job yourself each year, your staff will never have a doubt over whether it’s fair you have the ability to delegate menial work.

17. Fairness/Equity – Fairness is one of the key criteria by which employees measure their superiors. Quite simply, if you don’t behave in an equitable manner at all times, you will lead no more than a rabble of reluctant workers, and will never gain their respect. Fairness is one of Herzberg’s hygiene factors. This means that if you are fair, employees will not be inherently motivated, but merely content. If however you act unfairly and break the rules, employees will be demotivated. Very little upside if you possess this trait but large potential negative effects on motivation if you lack it.

16. Modesty – An important aspect to remember is that in every team you lead, some will be envious of your job or position. These people are also often the most active, ambitious and productive members of the group, so it’s extremely important that you keep them onside. By being modest and humble, you minimise the potential for jealousy within the team, and inspire warmth and affection instead.

15. Appreciates Quality – Simply put, a good leader recognises that quality is the most important gauge of the work done. A culture that cares little for quality will demotivate employees and reduce job satisfaction. Staff must be able to feel good about their work and their skills.

14. Sense of Humour – A practical reality for most leaders is that you’ll spend an awful lot of time in meetings or speaking in public. A good sense of humour helps to put across the message you want to convey more effectively and help smooth over awkward or tense moments in board meetings etc.

13. Wide Outlook – A good leadership trait is to be able to take a step back and take a look at the big picture. This is really the main purpose of a leader, but so many managers instead choose to get bogged down in small decisions that should really be taken care of by someone else. While everyone is cleaning the deck and preparing the sails, *somebody* has to be looking where the ship is going.

12. Adaptability and Flexibility – A clear fact in life is that many things you enjoy will change, and many things you despise will quickly improve. As a leader, you must be able to cope with negative change, and also be able to quickly grab opportunities as soon as they appear. Less hesitation, and more asking the question, “OK, so how can I make the best of this situation?”

11. Human Understanding – A leader who can understand his/her employees and really be able to empathise with the workforce or team as a whole will ultimately be a far more effective leader. Only by being able to put yourself in the shoes of your employees will you be able to make decisions that will enthuse and motivate your staff.

10. Clarity – Job roles and positions within companies can sometimes be, at best, a complete mess. Leadership is about separately and clearly identifying those roles and responsibilities and ensuring that everyone knows what they’re supposed to be doing.

9. Charisma – The skill of oratory has been perfectly demonstrated recently by Barack Obama’s surge in popularity en route to the White House, and his continued popularity now that he has gained office. The ability to speak confidently and with meaning is a rare one, and carries much merit for those few who possess it. Increased influence and persuasion is just one of the positive benefits of being a leader with charisma.

8. Ability to Delegate – As I mentioned earlier, delegation is one of the perks of being promoted to a leadership position. Why is it then that so many leaders fail to delegate enough? Why do they continue to ‘meddle’ in small, trivial matters, and refuse to give subordinates the real responsibility and confidence to be able to make their own decisions? The answer is because it’s a lot harder than you’d think to be able to properly delegate control to someone else. Especially the control over a job you’ve been doing yourself for many years. By undermining your subordinate’s ability to make decisions independently, you’re being a poor leader. That’s why the ability to delegate is one of my top 20 traits.

7. Calmness – Calmness is a leadership trait that again we could do with learning from President Obama. One of the most common pieces of praise I hear for President Obama is how he has stayed so calm under pressure. With the recession, Middle East conflict and recent fiascos such as swine flu, piracy and torture memos, it has sincerely impressed many that this man has been able to keep his composure and present a solid front. Any leader that can achieve this will instantly earn respect.

6. Ability to Listen – The fantastic leaders thorough history were also good listeners. Drawing upon the expertise and ideas of all those around you will improve your decision making. It follows that leaders who listen well simply make better decisions.

5. Confidence – Confidence flows through a team just like cheerfulness or a hardworking attitude. If the leader shows hesitation, self-doubt, or a lack of ambition, it will infect the rest of the team. Enthusiastically following an unconfident will really test employees’ attitude, and this is something you don’t want to be doing. You want to make it as easy as possible for people to enthusiastically follow your lead.

4. Consistency – This is a similar point to fairness. If you fail to be consistent with your attitude, decisions or behavior, you will be causing unrest in your team.

3. Approachability & Friendliness – While many managers dream of being a superior and ‘feared’ leader, the most effective type of leader is an approachable one. A leader with whom any employee feels like they could have a conversation will be able to hear about what the quiet dissenters have to say, or what the ‘real’ results of their latest initiative were.

2. Passion and Motivation – It goes without saying that a leadership trait that will be admired is your passion for what you do. Whatever your role, people will respect the fact that you take pride in your work, you enjoy it, and that you will therefore try your hardest to succeed. Passion and motivation will always trump formal leadership training.

1. Trustworthiness - Ethics and trust has to come right at the top of the most important leadership traits for one simple reason. Nobody will obey, follow, or be inspired by someone they distrust. A good reputation, likeability and respect will be absolutely impossible if you’re labeled as a liar. Regardless of their own malpractices, people will never be able to associate with an untrustworthy character.