

Part One

Mindset skills

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01

Positive leadership

Cynicism is in plentiful supply in the lower reaches of many organizations. There are many cynical junior and middle managers who are going to stay that way: cynical and junior. Our research found no effective leaders who were cynical about their work, their organization, themselves or their lives. They were relentlessly positive about everything.

Being positive is different from the hippy mantra of 'Be happy; don't worry.' Positive leadership is a frame of mind where leaders:

- look to the future, not to the past;
- focus on action, not on analysis;
- see possibilities, not just problems;
- take control versus being controlled;
- create options versus accepting the status quo.

Some people behave like this naturally. For the rest of us, the good news is that these are habits that can be learnt. Choose which set of questions from Table 1.1 you want, in a tough situation, to be working on in your head. Keep asking yourself these questions and you will run a serious risk of appearing and acting like a positive and effective leader.

Table 1.1 Asking the right questions

Leader mindset	Follower mindset
What are some possible solutions/options/ways forward?	What went wrong?
What can I do now to regain control and build momentum?	Why have I been put in this position?
Whose support do I need and how will I get it?	Who messed up? Who is going to put this right?
What can I learn from this?	How do I avoid the blame?

In our research, we came across some outstanding examples of leaders thinking positively:

- An arsonist had burned down one wing of the school. The head-teacher saw this as a great opportunity to redesign and rebuild the school in the way she wanted it to be, and the insurance company would pay. She was not, as far as we know, responsible for the arson attack.
- The Japanese subsidiary of a multinational was losing US \$2 million a year and jobs were at risk. The leader of the subsidiary persuaded head office that it should invest US \$2 million a year in building its Japanese subsidiary. Head office thought this was great. Losses (bad) were miraculously converted into investment (good) and everyone was happy.
- The politician was meeting voters, and always wanted to say something nice to them. One person came up and introduced himself as a pawnbroker: what can you say that is positive about that? ‘Wonderful... pawnbroking is where banking really started hundreds of years ago... and you are still the only people who provide banking services to the poor. You provide a very important and historic service.’ One more vote in the bag as the pawnbroker disappeared, happy, down the street.

Cynical junior and middle managers are going to stay that way: cynical and junior.

02

Responsibility

Responsibility is massively abused in management speak. Most people's hearts sink when responsibility comes into the conversation: it is rarely a positive development.

It can be used as a guilt trip by senior managers on team members: 'Remember you are responsible for the outcome of this project.' It can be used as petty politics to define and defend territory: 'This is my responsibility; if I need your help I will ask for it.' It can be used by jobsworths to avoid responsibility: 'I can't do that: it's not my responsibility. It's more than my job's worth to let you do that.'

So forget how the organization abuses the idea of responsibility, and focus on what it means for you as a leader. Here are three things that all leaders must be responsible for, and where many people struggle:

- 1 You are responsible for your career.** If you have a lousy job with a lousy boss in a lousy organization, who is responsible for that? Only when you take responsibility for your own destiny can you start to control it. At times, your choices may be very uncomfortable, but you always have choices.
- 2 You are responsible for what happens to you, even the bad stuff.** 'I got ripped off first for £500,000, then for £5 million and finally for £50 million within five years. So I was making progress, of sorts: the disasters were at least getting bigger and more interesting. At first I blamed the people who ripped me off. Then I realized that if I was a victim, then I was only a victim of my own folly in letting myself be ripped off.' Once you take responsibility, you take control and you start to make progress.

Until that point you are a victim of a cruel world: leaders never let themselves become victims. They take control.

- 3 You are responsible for your own feelings.** This is the killer, literally. Research shows that pessimists die sooner and have a lower quality of life than optimists. And if you want to feel angry, frustrated and upset with your colleagues, that is your choice: there is no law that says you must. And if you feel that way, the chances are your feelings will affect your colleagues and things will only get worse. Or you can feel calm, positive and action-focused: your colleagues are likely to respond better. It takes time to retrain instinctive reactions and feelings, but it can be done. The starting point is to realize that how you feel is how you choose to feel: choose well.

All of this qualifies as a BFO: a Blinding Flash of the Obvious. But it is so obvious that it is very hard to see, especially in the heat of battle or in the slough of despond when emotions can overwhelm sense. As George Orwell wrote: 'To see what is in front of your nose requires a constant struggle.'

If you can see this and act on it, you will not only lead better: you will live better and longer.

03

High aspirations

Low aspirations are self-fulfilling. People who believe they can, and people who believe they can not, are both usually right.

You may think that people in senior positions lack talent or competence. The low aspiration response is to complain about them. The high aspiration response is to realize that you can do better than them; you should be able to join the leadership ranks. The great entrepreneurs of the world did not succeed by thinking small: they dared to think big and played to win.

High aspirations by themselves are just a pipe dream. We can all dream of becoming a top musician or sports star, or perhaps a billionaire. But dreaming is not enough. Every top sports star has a long history of obsessive training. High aspirations demand hard work. It can take 20 years to become an overnight success.

High aspirations should extend to everything you do. 'Good enough' is the motto for also-rans, especially in today's world where work is ambiguous and open-ended. High aspirations mean constant challenge: challenge yourself to do better, learn more and achieve excellence.

If you want a high-performing team, do not be afraid to set high expectations. Most people rise or fall to the level of expectations they encounter. By setting high expectations, you help your team achieve more and develop faster. Provided you support and help them, they will be grateful to be part of a high-performing team, not a 'B' team.

In practice, complacency is the enemy of high aspirations and high performance. In many organizations over 90 per cent of staff are rated as above average. This is statistically impossible, but emotionally

inevitable: no one likes to be told they are below average. As a test, are you below or above average in terms of honesty, effort, competence, driving ability and love making? Few people care to rate themselves below average. But if we already think we are above average, we see little need to improve. We lack the objective performance data that drives sprinters and other athletes on to ever better performance.

To make aspirations a reality, you need to ask yourself a few simple questions:

- Where do I really want to be in five (or ten) years' time?
- Where do I think I will be in five (or ten) years' time given what I am doing now?
- What do I need to do differently (building skills, new roles and experiences) to achieve my goals?
- Am I prepared to do what it takes (time, effort, risk)?
- So what do I need to do differently now?

If you are satisfied with your performance, your aspirations are not high enough. We can all do better if we have the courage to challenge ourselves, test ourselves and learn and develop.

People who believe they can and people who believe they cannot are both usually right.

04

Have courage

If you follow the herd, you will never get ahead of the herd. You can have a quiet and relatively safe career by following the herd. If you want to lead, you have to take some risk.

In any organization there are moments of truth where people shine or shrink. There are crises, where no one is sure what to do; there are new ideas and projects that need a champion to take the lead; and there are moments of uncertainty where direction is needed but lacking. These are all moments when leaders step up and followers step back.

Fortunately, courage is not something you are born with or without. You can learn courage. The chief of the fire service exploded with anger when it was suggested that his firemen must be very brave to go into burning buildings. 'I don't want brave firemen. Brave firemen become dead firemen fast!' So how does he get raw recruits to do things that most of us would consider brave and dangerous? First, he makes them learn how to deploy a ladder. Then he trains them to climb a few feet safely. Then he exposes them to a small fire in a bucket. And slowly the heights and the fires get bigger and bigger. Eventually, the recruits become fully trained firemen. They do things which seem courageous to us, but are routine to them.

As with firemen, so with managers. We can learn courage. Start with small steps. We are often braver away from work: use family experience and perhaps volunteering experience to learn how to hold your ground, to push new ideas and to take the lead. At work, volunteer for discretionary projects: they are a great chance to learn and develop. Learn to stand up for your interests; challenge

nonsense when you see it rather than complaining about it later around the water cooler.

Courage is built one step at a time, which means taking no more than small risks to start with. Very brave managers are like very brave firemen: they risk a premature demise. Once you know how to take smaller risks, you can take the larger risks comfortably. When you are familiar with risks and know how to manage them, they cease to be risks.

- Where have you pushed yourself beyond your comfort zone in the last three months?
- What did you learn and how could you improve?
- Where do you want to push yourself in the next three months?

If you follow the herd, you will never get ahead of the herd.

05

Be adaptable

Carbon dating is a good way of dating fossils. Music is a good way of dating the living fossils of management. Ask people what their favourite music and films are, and most people will date themselves pretty accurately: people who like The Doors and Dire Straits are older than those who like Coldplay and The Smiths, who are older than the fans of Rihanna. And if you still like the Spice Girls, just keep quiet about it.

The same is true of films, books and management. There is a time when we are learning, absorbing and changing and then... and then we are in danger of ossifying and becoming a fossil living in a time warp of our own. We have all come across old-time managers who use their malign experience to tell you that they have seen it all before: it didn't work then and it won't work now. But standing still in a fast-changing world is dangerous to your career.

Most managers learn a success formula early in their careers. They learn by seeing how their peers and bosses succeed or mess up, and they copy and avoid those examples as necessary. But the problem is that the success formula will not stay the same over your career. For instance, expectations change as you progress through an organization:

- Entry level: work hard, be reliable, learn your craft.
- Front line manager: delegate, motivate, monitor and develop staff.

- Middle manager: make things happen through people you do not control, influence, build alliances, work agendas, deal with ambiguity and conflicting goals.
- Top manager: strategic vision, excellent communications, deal with high-level external stakeholders, good financial sense.

As you progress you have to learn new functional skills: marketing people eventually have to understand finance and HR; IT people have to learn about customers and markets, and so on. To succeed, you have to keep learning, growing and developing. If you are still doing stock checks for the annual audit at the age of 50, you do not have the right skill set to be the partner in charge, even if your stock checks are brilliant. You can let your taste in music remain unchanged; you cannot afford to let your skills remain unchanged.

Test yourself

- What new skills have you developed in the last three years?
- What new skills will you need in the next stage of your career?
- Are you learning the skills you will need for the future?

06

Learn to be lucky

All successful leaders admit to being lucky: they create their own luck. The question is how to create your own luck. Try the 5P luck programme:

- 1 Practice.** The more you practise, the luckier you get. The long-shot putt becomes a 50/50 putt; the 50/50 becomes easy. Practice converts luck into skill.
- 2 Persistence.** The difference between failure and success is giving up. Setbacks are great learning experiences: most leaders and entrepreneurs have more than their share of setbacks.
- 3 Preparation.** If you do not know what you are looking for, you will not find it. Know what you want; hunt it persistently.
- 4 Positive outlook.** Look for solutions, not problems. Look for action, not analysis. Be confident in yourself: if you are not enthusiastic, no one else will be. Don't get sucked into a culture of negativity. All this means that luck can be learnt.
- 5 Perspective.** We are as lucky as we feel. If you focus on all that goes wrong in the day, you will feel you have bad luck. If you count all your blessings, suddenly you will feel lucky. You are as lucky as you choose to be. Choose well.

Focus on luck

Review all the setbacks you have had. Are you lucky? Review all the successes and narrow escapes you have had. Are you still unlucky? Luck is largely a matter of self-perception.

Look at all the problems you have. Feeling bad? Look at all the options you have and how you might achieve them. Feeling better? Now find some practical first steps and move to action.

Look at some successful entrepreneurs. Aren't their ideas obvious? You or I could have done it as well. The entrepreneurs do not even look smart intellectually or socially. So I must be able to do better than them. Right now, someone is making the next obvious idea into a big success. Why shouldn't that person be you?

Leaders create their own luck.

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07

Managing stress

If you find it hard to get to sleep, you are not alone. There is a quiet epidemic of stress among managers and leaders, and it comes directly from the changed nature of work. In the past, work and leisure were compartmentalized. If business people had a briefcase, it was to carry their sandwiches and a newspaper. The shackles of e-mail and the internet did not exist. But now work and leisure are co-mingled: we do personal business at work and we work even at home.

To make matters worse, work has become ambiguous. It is never clear when your work as a leader is done. There is always something more you can do. If you produce a report, it could be two pages or 200. And even if it is 200 pages, there is always another fact or opinion you could gather, another analysis you could do. And so even if we leave the office, the office never leaves us. There are armies of leaders thinking, not sleeping, each night.

There are several radical options for dealing with stress:

- Drop out and start your vegan farm.
- Become a Buddhist monk.
- See a shrink – or become one.

Most of us do not have the luxury of taking these options unless we want to lose our house and family. So we need something more practical. You have five ways of dealing with stress:

- 1 Take control.** The difference between pressure and stress is control. If you are working very hard but you are in control, you may get tired but you will not get stressed. Now take away control: you are no longer in control of events on which your

future depends. Suddenly your stress levels will go through the roof. The trick is to focus on what you can control and influence: if you can do something about it, do it. If you cannot do anything, it is pointless worrying about it. Even if it is only a small thing, do it: give yourself the impression of control and hope. Don't worry about things you cannot control.

- 2 Compartmentalize your life.** You do not have to answer e-mails in the middle of the night or on holiday. Create barriers and set expectations with colleagues appropriately. Even the godfather of time and motion, Frederick Taylor, found that regular breaks did not interrupt production: they improved productivity by making sure workers were refreshed for the work at hand. Compartmentalizing your life is easy if you have clear goals for the week and for each day: you will know when you have reached a reasonable milestone and you can start to switch off. If you have no clear goals, then by definition your work will never finish because you will never reach your goals.
- 3 Get help.** The easiest way to get something done is to get someone else to do it for you. It's called delegation. Delegation is a great way to show trust in your team and to help them grow and develop. Do not try to do it all yourself: your team will not thank you for hogging all the interesting work. Find a coach; find friends or family you can talk to. A problem shared is a problem halved. Often the simple act of talking about a challenge resolves it.
- 4 Find the right role.** Some roles are inherently more stressful than others, and many people enjoy such high-octane jobs: stress junkies need stressful roles. If you are not a stress junkie but you are in a role where stress is part of the job description, then you may want to think about whether you are in the right role.
- 5 Keep perspective.** Over the years I have cancelled big family events for the sake of some urgent and important crisis at work. I now have no idea what those famous work battles were all about, but I still feel the pain of missing the family events. The sky will not fall down without you holding it up for the rest of humanity. Keep a clear sense of your priorities and act accordingly.

08

Honesty

For a leader, honesty is not just about morals and ethics; it is much more important than that. Honesty is about survival.

Who wants to work for you?

Think about the leaders you have wanted to work for, versus those you have had to work for. How many of the leaders you have wanted to work for did you not trust? The chances are, you trust the leaders you want to work for. And you probably only trust people who are honest with you.

If people have to follow you because of your power and position, they will. But do not be fooled into thinking they want to follow you unless they trust you. To build trust with your followers, you have to be honest with them. This is hard-form honesty: telling the whole truth promptly, even when it is painful. This is an honesty test most politicians fail; then they wonder why no one trusts them.

Authority and popularity are weak currencies for leadership. Authority can be removed in a reorganization. Popularity leads to weakness: you avoid the difficult conversations; you avoid stretching the team too far; you accept excuses. Honesty and trust are the true currencies for leadership. No one can take them away from you. Honesty and trust build respect, which lasts longer than popularity.

Honesty is tough

Someone is not meeting your expectations. Do you tell the person now or let it slide in the hope that things might get better anyway?

The business is facing difficulties. Do you tell the staff or keep quiet because bad news might unsettle them?

In each case, failing to act promptly simply builds up bigger problems for later, and failure to act is corrosive of the trust you need to build.

Honesty is not just about morals and ethics. It's about survival.

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09

Self-awareness

No leader gets ticks in all the boxes. This is deeply reassuring: you do not have to be perfect to lead. Look around you, and you will see that all leaders are flawed in some way. Having a weakness, or a ‘development opportunity’ in today’s jargon, is not an obstacle to leadership if you know what to do about it.

Effective leaders are keenly aware of what they are good at and what they are not good at. It takes great self-confidence, self-awareness and humility to admit to not being good at things. But that is the critical first step towards doing something about it.

All leaders have weaknesses, but fortunately leadership is a team sport. The first act of a good leader should be to assemble a good team. An ineffective team will all be clones of the leader. An effective team will complement the leader’s technical strengths and personal style. Your job is not to be the best person on the team. As a leader, your job is to get all the best people onto the team.

High self-awareness allows you to focus on your signature strengths. Just as we all have weaknesses, we all have strengths. The trick is to know what you are uniquely good at doing, and then do more of it. Deal with weaknesses by building a team and delegating: if you are lousy at tax management, find an accountant who can do that for you.

Self-awareness is also essential day to day. We have all been in meetings where someone drones on, completely unaware that he or she is boring or irritating everyone else; we have seen people lose the plot and lose their temper. The best leaders do not do this. They have an ability to detach and watch themselves from the outside. They become a fly on the wall, watching their own performance and asking some simple questions:

- If I was listening to this, how would I react?
- How are the others reacting?
- What do the people listening want and need to hear?

This is different from the internal dialogue inside inexperienced managers' heads:

- How can I get my point across?
- I wish they would shut up so I can make my point.
- Why don't these idiots understand I am right?

Highly self-aware managers are acutely aware of others and see themselves through the eyes of other people. Managers with low self-awareness only see their world through their own warped eyes.

It takes great self-confidence, self-awareness and humility to admit to not being good at things.

Developing self-awareness

Make an honest (and humble) list of what you are good at and what you are not good at in terms of:

- technical skills;
- interpersonal and leadership skills;
- personal style.

Now have someone you know and trust review the list with you. You can do the same for the other person and make it a two-way exercise. Finally, review the strengths and weaknesses of your team: have you got the balance right?

No leader gets ticks in all the boxes.

10

Working to win

Athletes, like leaders, do not win by playing to their weaknesses and imagining failure. They win by building on their strengths and rehearsing, visualizing success in their minds. Leaders have an advantage over athletes: leaders can delegate to other people to compensate for their own weaknesses. From this come four simple principles of working to win:

- 1 Play to your strengths.** Know what you are good at and in what context (occupation, company and project).
- 2 Visualize success.** This is important before big, stressful events. Walk through each step of the event, seeing what a successful outcome looks like, feels like, smells like and sounds like. Rehearse it as vividly as possible. Then make it happen.
- 3 Think like a winner.** Remember all the times you have done great things. Let yourself get back into that frame of mind. When you believe you will succeed, you will. Failure is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you have no enthusiasm or confidence, no one else will be enthusiastic or confident for you.
- 4 Create a team that compensates for your weaknesses.** If you are no good at accounting, for instance, rest assured there are thousands of accountants out there to help.

Learning to work to win

Draw up your list of strengths and weaknesses. See what you can do to work in situations that play to your strengths, and start looking for people you can partner with to compensate for your weaknesses.

Try visualizing success and rehearsing as vividly as possible the sights, sounds, smells, feelings and actions of success. Visualize your biggest successes as vividly as possible. These successes define who you are. You are a winner, so keep winning.

Failure is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you have no enthusiasm or confidence, no one else will be enthusiastic or confident for you.

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