



Swotting up on the latest management methods will not turn you from a good leader into a great one. But a warts-and-all look at yourself just might

## Alex Pratt

# Up close and personal

In the context of current debate about what makes a great director, I've been wondering what it is that sets truly legendary leaders apart from the mere good and the great, and what we might learn and apply from their leadership legacies.

Legendary leaders are people who have changed humanity's direction of travel by gathering together followers in such influential numbers, holding such fervent faith, that the course of history has been forever altered. They have each, in their own way, delivered social or commercial innovation on a massive scale.

How was it possible for a frail and slight Mahatma Gandhi to lead an impoverished people to challenge the British Empire? Can we learn anything from a deranged corporal in the German army who led the world into a bloody global conflict that reshaped our lives? And how was it that being imprisoned on an island with the barest essentials brought out the inner strength in both Napoleon and Nelson Mandela?

I was thinking about this when I found myself among a group of speakers sharing our thoughts with the chairmen of a chief executives' network. You know the score, directors from non-competing companies meet every month under the watchful eye of a chairman to help further each other's abilities, and to impart this month's wisdom.

I tried to discuss the less tangible, more fundamental, challenges of leadership development, such as how to build inner strength of character through a defined strategy for picking personal truths from numerous, often conflicting, solutions.

Take food for example; who can you believe about what to eat these days when there are so many competing wisdoms? It was here that I lost them. "OK, but what tools do we use? Can't you give us some new tools to take away?" was the impatient response. I was tempted to suggest the tried and tested ones of patience, contemplative silence, and trusting your intuition, but they only had ears for the current all-singing, all-dancing management theories—akin to a DIY enthusiast asking for the latest cordless Black & Decker to put right all those jobs that went wrong.

That's when it hit me. A perpetual search for new tools is no different to blaming our current kit for our

substandard performance, which we all know to be the excuse of the poorest workmen. It's so much easier to concentrate on tooling up, than learning and honing your personal craft of leadership. Unfortunately, finding a spot on your office shelf for the latest management chainsaw simply increases the chances of a branch of your company being cut off, and does nothing positive to attract more followers.

I bet, like me, you have a pile of unfinished business books, self-help tapes, and notes from a long-forgotten time management initiative, clogging up your shelves. All of us fall into this seductive trap at one time or another. Own this gadget and you'll become more efficient. Follow that diet and you'll be thin. Join the gym and you'll get fit. Newsflash: new tools are not your answer.

Imagine if Martin Luther King had been like the rest of us and thought: "I have a dream that people will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character—but before I deliver that important speech I'll save up for the latest microphone." It's ridiculous. I'd rather risk my life in the hands of a dedicated surgeon equipped with an old kitchen knife than a "tool collector" wielding the latest scalpel.

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Legendary leaders continually work at their talents, until they are worn out from practice, practice, and more practice. Like golfing legend Gary Player, the more they do, the luckier they seem to become. Conversely, the pursuit and adoption of other people's solutions to personal leadership issues is the surest sign of a director out of their depth and in need of coaching.

So, I'm now trying harder to work on how I react to events, and others around me. If becoming a better leader is about maturing into a character who others feel more drawn towards and choose to follow, then not becoming the dork at the golf club—with the latest pings but an attitude that pongs—seems a good first step.

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