

Leaders need to be team players to gain trust and support of staff

In the third in our series of interviews with regional business figures on leadership in the workplace, we talk to Andrew Larpent OBE, chief executive of the Somerset Care Group, Somerset's leading provider of residential, nursing and home care for older people.

Andrew Larpent was previously chief executive of CLIC (Cancer & Leukaemia in Childhood), and served in the Army for 25 years. His military career culminated in the command of the 3rd Battalion, Royal Regiment of Fusiliers from 1990 to 1992, which included commanding the Fusiliers Battlegroup through the Gulf War in 1991. He was awarded the OBE in recognition of his successful leadership of his regiment.

A wise old General once gave Andrew Larpent the following words of advice on how to become an inspirational leader: "Notice all things, change some things, fear only God and cherish the brethren!"

This advice has clearly served Andrew well during his successful career in the Army and as chief executive of both CLIC and the Somerset Care Group.

During his four years with CLIC from 1997 to 2001, the charity doubled in size, growing from its regional origins in the West Country to becoming a recognised national cancer charity.

Speaking about his time with CLIC, Andrew says: "I learned a great deal about styles of leadership from my fascinating four years with the charity.

"CLIC is an outstanding charity that does wonderful work with children and families enduring the challenges of childhood cancer. Over its 30 years of history, the charity has



Andrew Larpent, CE, Somerset Care Group

needed different leadership styles at different times.

"The initial energy and inspiration came from one driven and totally committed individual, the founder Bob Woodward, without whom the charity would never have got off the ground.

"During my time there was a need for the organisation to change and to adopt a more participative and team approach by trustees and others to lead the organisation and ensure the charity's continued growth and success."

Andrew is passionate about the need for effective leadership in the workplace if an organisation is to have any chance of success: "Organisations with no clear direction, no energy and no leadership will have no difficulty in not going anywhere," he says.

And it's not just leadership at the top that makes the difference. "To be a leading organisation you need leadership throughout. It's generally the skills and commitment of individual leaders at junior levels within an organisation that generates its power and potential, while those at the top need the wisdom and experience to lead people in the right direction

and to develop the collective power and potential of the individuals within it.”

According to Andrew, it is essential to combine an ethos of teamwork with a culture of leadership in order to harness a workforce’s collective energy.

“An organisation with a strong leadership culture enables the creation of a positive, can-do attitude amongst staff at all levels, together with a passionate and shared belief in the business and the services or products it provides.

“This needs to be combined with a high degree of teamwork, mutual respect and recognition that the team as a whole is more powerful than the sum of the output of the individuals within it.”

Andrew believes the leader of any organisation must work as a team player if he or she is to earn the trust and support of the staff, comparing the role of a managing director to that of a skipper:

“Everyone knows who the skipper is but the skipper is playing on the pitch alongside others in the team, enabling people to develop and providing support and encouragement.”

But the skipper needs to recognise his or her own responsibilities when things get difficult and all eyes turn to the leader for guidance and inspiration. Andrew comments: “This is the time when the qualities of the leader must come to the fore and he or she must be ready to step to the front and give decisive, effective leadership.”

So how would Andrew describe the characteristics of a true leader?

“A leader has to inspire others and set an example. They must have a certain presence and above all command respect for the manner in which they conduct themselves. Strong communication and interpersonal skills are essential. So too are enthusiasm, commitment to the task, toughness in the right measure, the ability to enable others to achieve success, the ability to build teams and to achieve results.

“In my eyes, Winston Churchill was the greatest leader of all time. He had the ability to inspire a nation to achievements few would have thought possible at a time of massive national crisis.”

During his military career, Andrew was fortunate to encounter many strong leaders: “Of them all the leader I most admired was General Rupert Smith who commanded the 1st Armoured Division in the first Gulf War in 1991.

His self-effacing manner and absolute professionalism inspired trust and tremendous confidence in all who served in his division and with the US and coalition forces with whom we worked.”

Moving on to talk about the Somerset Care Group, where he is currently chief executive, Andrew explains that leadership is essential in setting standards and developing people through good example setting.

“We are passionate about developing people and challenging the traditional image of the care workforce. We are also in the business of managing growth to meet the increasing needs and expectations of an ageing population. Our commitment to training is about personal growth and developing potential. Growth requires change and managing change demands effective leadership throughout the whole organisation.”

Andrew continues: “Leaders in the care sector need to be passionate about and interested in people. We are looking to develop a workforce of people who are committed to working at the very highest level they can in everything they do for others.

“In the care sector, leadership is about standards. Nothing but the best will do and all staff must be passionate about their work. This is not exclusive to our sector but care is above all a vocational occupation. It is more than just a job. It’s a way of life.”

Andrew is strongly in favour of the recognition of achievement and the promotion of good leadership role models. For this reason he warmly welcomes the launch of the Leadership @ Work Award by the Western Daily Press and the Mentor Consultancy, and adds: “I very much hope we will see some examples of the outstanding leadership that exists in the care sector when the winners are announced.”

Encouraging nominations for people who might not think of themselves as leaders,

Andrew says: “There are many people in society who would not recognise themselves as leaders but who nevertheless have all the qualities. This can range from the member of staff who takes on a charity fundraising event to a parent who volunteers to join the school parent/teacher body to someone who takes a stand on an issue as a matter of principle and emerges as a great champion.”