

The academic approach to leadership

In the first in our series of interviews with key regional figures on leadership in the workplace, we talk to Professor Eric Thomas, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bristol since 2001.

With a responsibility for more than 5500 staff and 14,500 students spread across six faculties, 45 departments and 15 research centres, Professor Eric Thomas finds himself regularly devoting time to reflect on the nature of his role as the institution's overall leader.

"As an exercise to help me define my role, I try to imagine what would happen to the university if there were no Vice-Chancellor," Professor Thomas explains.

"The way I see it, no one would really notice much of a difference in the first year. It isn't like we're working in a constantly high pressured environment such as an A&E department in a hospital for instance. But gradually a downward drift would begin to manifest itself, possibly exemplified through Bristol's performance in the league tables and its ability to keep abreast of modern advances and cutting edge technology. The university would slowly lose its focus and drive."

Professor Thomas takes his position of leadership at the university very seriously but is quick to acknowledge his role is very different to that of, say, the captain of a ship. He is not an isolated figurehead, alone at the helm, but co-ordinator and facilitator of an enormous team of brilliant minds and exceptional talent.

"The Vice-Chancellor cannot lead by dictatorship," he says. "Leadership of the



Eric Thomas, Vice-Chancellor, University of Bristol

university has to be consensual – our charter and statutes make this very clear. But this brings its own challenges. I am responsible for the leadership of genius, which can be extremely complicated.

"As Vice-Chancellor, I must have my own vision of where I want the university to be, but this vision needs to be developed through on-going consultation with others. All academic decisions are formally taken by the Senate. If a consultative process wasn't followed, no one would pay any attention to my opinions."

Professor Thomas is a passionate advocate for developing inspirational leadership, although he recognises that there is something of the X Factor in what actually constitutes this.

"Some people are undoubtedly natural leaders. Anyone can learn to be a leader but it takes emotional intelligence to be an inspirational leader. It's impossible to lead

effectively without empathy.”

Different leadership skills and qualities are also required in different situations: “Some people make much better wartime leaders than peacetime, and vice versa. Take the Italian leaders Garibaldi and Cavour for example. Their different characters and approaches to leadership were needed by their country at almost the same time.

“But one thing holds true for any leader, in any situation. I am always able to give a robust explanation of where I want to take the university. All leaders need to be able to articulate this to others - where they want to go and why. If you can’t do this, no one’s going to be inclined to follow you.”

Professor Thomas adds that to achieve this, true leaders also need to demonstrate vision and courage: the vision of where you want to go and the courage to take people there with you. These are the factors that will inspire confidence in you as a leader.

As a research fellow at Sheffield University, Professor Thomas worked under Professor Cooke, who helped him appreciate and understand the role of true leadership at close hand.

“Professor Cooke is one of the most influential leaders I’ve had the privilege to work alongside and learn from. He had real vision and the courage to take risks. His love for and knowledge of his subject inspired us to work towards achieving his vision.”

Professor Thomas says he is delighted that the Western Daily Press is working with the Mentor Consultancy to launch the new Leadership @ Work Award: “We need to celebrate example of real leadership wherever we come across it,” he says. “I support wholeheartedly the concept of recognising and rewarding leadership at all levels, not just at the top of an organisation where you’d naturally expect to find it.

“Leadership in the workplace has a huge impact. We’ve all suffered at some point in the hands of a poor leader, therefore this can be easier to define. We should use this opportunity to demonstrate what we do want to see in our leaders.”

We asked Professor Thomas who he considers to be the greatest leader of all time.

“Queen Elizabeth I. She reigned as a woman in a man’s world for 45 years, an extraordinarily long period of time during which she defined forever an era of British history. Overcoming numerous challenges, Elizabeth changed the nature of our country immensely.”

So does Professor Thomas believe that women display different leadership styles to men?

“This is very interesting and it’s a frequent aspect of our discourse about leadership at the university. Some commentators say that men are more macho about leadership. They identify problems and stand up to them. Others have highlighted that women tend to be more consensual as leaders. They are more willing to concede ground to resolve a problem and they are more empathetic.

“I believe you see both aspects of leadership in both genders and would not want to generalise. What I do know is that all leadership requires an individual to be tough when the going gets rough. Sometimes breaking eggs is an inevitable part of the process of change and I know many individuals, men and women, find this the most difficult aspect of leadership.”

Finally, Professor Thomas offers these words of advice for anyone keen to develop themselves as a leader:

“Dream! Imagine the kind of leader you want to be. Think about the future of your organisation and where you want it to go. Where does it sit in the wider context?

“Don’t wait until your next interview for a promotion to think about these questions. And don’t restrict yourself – make sure you move organisations with some frequency so that you can broaden your ideas, experiences and skills. Don’t simply work your way up the ranks within the same organisation your entire career. Engage with the wider world to recognise the possibilities this brings.”