

Leaders need the courage to take tough decisions with integrity

In the second in our series of interviews with regional business figures on leadership in the workplace, we talk to John Simpson, the director of education for Tribal Group plc based near Cirencester, one of the UK's most successful and fastest growing consultancies supporting the public sector.

Leadership development is an important issue for John Simpson and his colleagues at the Tribal Group.

Employing around 2,000 staff throughout the country, it is crucial for every employee to fully understand the objectives of the organisation they are part of and are clear about their unique contribution to the company's continued success.

John explains that this depends on effective leadership at all levels: "Clear leadership enables people to recognise they are part of a wider whole with well defined aims and objectives, and to understand how their own specific role fits into this."

Tribal takes a systematic approach to developing the leadership skills of its management. They are currently working with the Henley Management Centre for instance to provide a programme of leadership training for 30 of its managers.

"A co-ordinated and consistent approach to developing leadership is vital if you're looking to become an excellent organisation. For me the definition of an excellent organisation is simple – excellent leadership delivering excellent results. A well managed, well administered



John Simpson, Director at Tribal Group

organisation can be efficient but not excellent."

Leadership is also important to Tribal in terms of presenting an external image of itself as a best practice or role model organisation.

"We need to demonstrate to our clients in the public sector that effective leadership is as much part of our ethos as we think it should be of theirs," says John. "Organisations come to us for support on a wide range of issues and leadership often lies at the heart of these. We must show clients that we practice what we preach so that they can see the impact of a dynamic leadership culture within Tribal itself and want to emulate that."

Prior to working for Tribal, John was director of education for the London Borough of Brent, which when he joined in the mid 1980s was seen by the media (especially *Private Eye*) as something of a joke.

"Our team had the mammoth task of turning Brent into an authority that could be widely respected. We recognised the need to support leadership across the whole organisation and we achieved this by establishing a

moral commitment to change and improvement for every individual working for Brent, especially around equality and diversity.

“The basic goal for each and every one of us had to be that the young people of Brent deserved a quality education and we had to ensure that everyone believed in this. Once everyone’s signed up to a common cause, it’s much easier to achieve what you set out to.

“However it did involve some hard decisions – we had to move people on who didn’t buy in to what we were trying to achieve. That’s part of leadership: the courage to make tough decisions so long as they are made ethically and with integrity.”

In John’s eyes, Nobel Peace Prize winner and the man who inspired the world with his determination to replace the apartheid regime of South Africa with a multi-racial democracy, Nelson Mandela is the greatest leader of all time.

“For me, Nelson Mandela encapsulates all the skills and qualities of an inspirational leader and we can all learn much from his style of leadership.

“He’s got the right mix of focus, commitment, communication skills, ability to see the big picture and personal humility – being a true leader isn’t at all about machismo and egotism. Mandela also displays great courage, integrity, emotional intelligence and independent thinking. As a leader, it’s vital that you can think for yourself.

“England rugby captain Martin Johnson also displayed many of these characteristics during the World Cup. In this instance, Johnson’s leadership needed to focus on just 80 minutes on the playing field, while Mandela’s has lasted decades. But they’re both excellent examples of great leadership albeit in very different situations.”

John has a lot of respect for the female leaders he’s worked with: “Women clearly face more challenges in leadership roles than men do. You only need to look at the statistics to see how few women make it into the top jobs. There are definitely sexist social barriers in place. It’s a similar situation for people from black and minority ethnic groups.

“Too many people assume that if women

or black people make it to the top, they’ve had a hand up to get there and don’t recognise their achievements for what they really are.

“I believe that male leaders have a lot to learn from their female counterparts. Women make much more sophisticated leaders. While men often focus on control, women use influence, which is much more appropriate for our times.”

So can people learn to be effective leaders or is it something some of us are simply born with?

“Everyone can improve their own leadership skills within their own life or work context but the important part is they’ve got to really want to. Some people do admittedly have a head start. They might naturally be more confident or perhaps had the right encouragement to develop as leaders through school or family.

“I don’t think absolutely anyone can become an outstanding leader but we can all work on our skills and look out for opportunities to use them in order to become better leaders. It’s important for people at all stages of their lives or careers to grow themselves as leaders if we’re going to improve society overall. It’s all about taking responsibility for ourselves and others.”

And what advice does John have for people who want to develop as leaders?

“Start now! Don’t just wait until someone offers you the chance to do a training course. There are plenty of opportunities within any organisation in which you can flourish, and they don’t all need to be at a time of crisis. Leadership is a positive force. We all recognise the association between leadership and success and we should try to see how we can apply it to ourselves in order to excel. Also I think it’s very important for leaders within an organisation to help others to develop as leaders too.

“We’ve all got to learn to take responsibility for ourselves, our team and the entire organisation we work for – perhaps not all at once but we need to recognise this responsibility within us.”