

In times of crisis, the true leader will light a way ahead

In the third in our series of interviews with key regional figures on leadership in the workplace, we talk to Juliet Williams, Chairman of the South West of England Regional Development Agency (SWERDA) since December 2002.

As Chairman of SWERDA, Juliet Williams's role is to champion the region's business growth and education agendas and fight for the South West in the corridors of both Westminster and Whitehall. Her natural drive, enthusiasm and charisma are highly infectious and she is an accomplished business woman and man-manager in her own right.

Juliet Williams is therefore no stranger to the role of effective leadership.

During her varied career, Juliet has led three companies through the struggle for survival, returning each to well-managed and profitable growth. In one case growing a company from £1 million to £25 million turnover within five years and sustaining a 12.5 per cent net profit delivered 'one of the 100 best companies to work for in the UK'. That company eventually went global with a turnover of £200 million.

Within SWERDA, Juliet believes leadership is essential on three different levels. "It is vital that we demonstrate to staff, stakeholders and partners an ability to take the lead and represent their interests at the heart of Government," Juliet explains.

"This is well illustrated by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister recognising the South West's need to table its own response to John Prescott's Sustainable Communities initiative. This was achieved by my persistence and that of our regional partners, who were equally determined.

"Secondly leadership is also required in the agency's role as facilitator, custodian and



Juliet Williams: Chairman of SWERDA

steward of the Regional Economic Strategy and its enlightened management of the interface between the economic, social and environmental agendas.

"And thirdly," Juliet continues, "leadership is important in defining the agency's culture, most particularly around our values, standards and behaviours in respect of both our staff and the wider community."

SWERDA is currently promoting effective leadership in the economy by investing £400,000 into the Leadership South West project, which aims to help companies in the region understand the relationship between leadership and business success.

According to Juliet, remarkably few businesses properly acknowledge, or indeed demonstrate, a clear understanding of the very real differences between the skills required of leaders and those required of managers.

"In simple terms, leadership is about taking charge in times of crisis and uncertainty," explains Juliet, "whilst managers prefer the greater certainty of planning and decision-making within a pre-determined framework.

"Successful leadership at the top not only

requires high levels of commitment and competence within the managerial cadre that underpins it but also leadership qualities emerging at critical pressure points throughout the organisational hierarchy," she continues.

In Juliet's opinion, sustained business growth is also a product of repeated creativity and innovation, which can only be achieved by passing the baton of leadership from one generation to the next.

"In today's commercial environment, a generation is unlikely to enjoy a lifespan of more than five years and thus, succession and sustainability are wholly dependent upon the recognition, nurturing and development of potential leaders throughout the workplace."

As a trained teacher and committed educator, Juliet believes that business excellence is born out of 'creating a dynamic but disciplined working environment within which every member of the workforce has the opportunity to have fun and to share the realisation of aspiration and ambition'.

Her personal commitment is to assist others to become the architects of their own business success. "I implore business leaders and influencers to ensure that personal development and career progression are encouraged and recipients of investment. It's vital that they find out for themselves that investment in people delivers profitable growth, market advantage and competitiveness. No business is too small or indifferent to reap the benefit."

Is there one person who Juliet considers to be the greatest leader of all time? "I don't think this is an easy question to answer because leadership is a product of character, time and circumstance," answers Juliet. "Indeed some of the greatest leaders have, arguably, been dictators and despots.

"In my own lifetime, I have admired Churchill and Thatcher and held enormous respect for Bill Clinton's intellect. I'm not sure though that there's a defensible answer as to who was actually the greatest of all time. How does one draw a comparison between Bill Clinton and Rupert Murdoch for example? Inevitably we opt for political leaders."

Juliet believes that most headline leaders are 'natural born' and a product of both time and circumstance. However, leadership traits do need nurturing and developing but again, only time and circumstance will put them to the test.

For people who want to develop as lead-

ers, Juliet has these words of advice: "You need to combine strength of personality, intellect and common sense, and think creatively 'outside the box' while being prepared to implement radical ideas.

"On the one hand you must demonstrate such qualities on the present job and on the other make sure performance is noticed by those in positions of influence. Management of internal politics to sustained personal advantage is a skill in its own right."

Commenting on the Western Daily Press and Mentor Consultancy's new Leadership @ Work Award, Juliet says: "This is an excellent initiative and I sincerely hope that it will capture the imagination of organisations traditionally outside the radar of public sector support and partnership."

The Mentor Consultancy and the Western Daily Press have established the Leadership @ Work Awards to recognise and promote the importance of leadership in the workplace. The winner will receive a £3,000 training voucher for their organisation.

This award is aimed at all employees, not just the managing director, chief executive or chair, because we recognise that leadership can be found in places many of us might not think to look.

To nominate your @ work leader contact Georgina on 0117 9237933 or email leadership@mentorltd.co.uk or go to www.mentorltd.co.uk/leadership for a nomination form.