

The real thing

An interview with Rob Goffee
and Gareth Jones

Rob Goffee, professor of organisational behaviour at London Business School, and Gareth Jones, first brought their original slant on the business world to a broader audience with their 1998 bestseller, *The Character of a*

latest book on leadership will be published by Harvard Business School Press in 2006. "The question – *Why should anyone be led by you?* – had an impact. Audiences paused for thought when they were asked it. Over the last five years, that question

broadcaster and writer, Studs Terkel. If you engage with people, you learn from them. It doesn't matter where people exercise leadership, they are still leaders.

And that's different to the conventional approach. Leadership

Great leadership has the potential to excite people to extraordinary levels of achievement.

Corporation. While this book focused on corporate culture – its closest intellectual antecedent is Rosabeth Moss Kanter's *Men and Women of the Corporation* – in the years since Goffee and Jones have focused their attentions on leadership and innovation.

Their research is resolutely based in the reality of leadership rather than in the leader-as-hero genre. Jones was director of human resources and internal communications at the BBC and a senior vice president at Polygram, as well as holding a series of academic positions.

Goffee and Jones won the McKinsey Award for their *Harvard Business Review* article, "Why should anyone be led by you?" Their

has taken us in intriguing, exciting, and often perplexing directions," reflected Rob Goffee when Stuart Crainer recently interviewed he and his co-author at their offices.

Your roots lie in sociology. How did you come to be diverted by leadership?

Gareth Jones: We have always been interested in real people doing real jobs. For our new book, we interviewed a cross section of people. They included a hospital nurse, a Zimbabwean soldier, a head teacher, a round the world yachtsman, and a variety of others – as well as many with people in an array of corporate positions. We like the approach of the great American

has tended to be associated with the heroic and the famous, but our work with companies has exposed us to a variety of leaders who excel at inspiring people. That's what really fascinates us: leaders who succeed in capturing hearts, minds and souls. Rob and I are fascinated by leadership which, reaching back to the ideas of Max Weber, is anti-bureaucratic and charismatic. To have leaders with these qualities is not everything in business, but we think that it is worth a lot.

But surely leadership needs some hard-and-fast parameters. It isn't just about attitude and personality?

Rob Goffee: True, leadership is about results. It has to be. Great

leadership has the potential to excite people to extraordinary levels of achievement. But it is not only about performance; it is also about meaning. This is an important point – and one that is often overlooked. Leaders at all levels make a difference to performance. They do so because they make performance meaningful.

And the quest for meaning is increasingly important to societies and individuals. As the pace of change increases, individuals are ever more motivated to search for constancy and meaning. We've become increasingly suspicious of a world dominated by the mere role player.

Reaching the top of an organisation does not make you a leader.

Jones: In organisations the search for the meaning and cohesion leaders provide is increasingly clear. Look at hierarchies. In the old world of organisations there were ornate hierarchies, more or less stable careers and clear boundaries. All this has changed. The trouble is that people now realise that hierarchies were not just structural co-ordinating devices in organisations. Rather, and much more significantly, they were sources of meaning. The organisation man, with company blood coursing through his veins, now has to come to terms with a world of high ambiguity in which over identification with one organisation is a problem rather than a career. As hierarchies flatten, meaning disappears so we look to leadership to instill our organisations with meaning.

This process has been underway for a while. But the corporate scandals of the last few years have brought it under the spotlight. They are a symptom of amoral leadership and the damage done to the ideology that makes our economic system cohere has been substantial. One side effect of this is that there is a lot of cynicism among executives. If you ask them while at work, "What

gives your life meaning?" – they mouth the latest corporate platitudes. Ask them at home and they will admit to profound symptoms of meaninglessness as they struggle with work-related stress and dysfunctional family lives.

What's the link between leadership and meaning?

Goffee: If there isn't a clearly articulated purpose, meaning is elusive. Leadership provides that articulation. This search for authenticity and leadership is reinforced whenever we work inside organisations. CEOs tell us that their most pressing need is for more leaders in their organisations – not

the consummate role-players who seem to surround them. And lower down the organisation the plea is either for more inspiring leadership, or, just as common, a fierce desire to develop leadership skills for themselves. Authentic leadership has become, the most prized organisational and individual asset.

Jones: That's what we find when we ask people which set of competences they would most like to develop. They all come up with the same answer: Help us to become more effective leaders. They have seen that leadership makes a big difference to their lives and the performance of their organisations. The same is true when we ask CEOs what is the biggest problem they face. They unerringly reply: Our organisations need more leaders at every level.

Why are leaders in short supply?

Jones: There are two reasons we think. First, organisations might desire leaders but they structure themselves in ways that kill leadership. Far too many are machines for the destruction of leadership. They encourage either conformists or role players. Neither makes for effective leaders.

The second reason is that our understanding of leadership is blinkered. For all the research into leadership, it is surprising how little we know. We're not criticising our academic colleagues when we say that, but questioning the methods we have used and the fundamental assumptions upon which much of the research has rested.

Goffee: Look at the main leadership literature and you will see that it focuses on the *characteristics* of leaders. There is a strong psychological bias. It sees leadership qualities as inherent to the individual. The underlying assumption is that leadership is something we do *to* other people. But, in our view, leadership should be seen as something we do *with* other people. Leadership must always be viewed as a relationship between the leader and the led.

A corollary of this is that books on leadership persistently try to find a recipe for leadership. There are long lists of leadership competences and characteristics. Anyone reading these books is bound to be disappointed. Reading about Jack Welch isn't going to make you into Jack Welch.

So there are no universal leadership characteristics?

Jones: We don't think so. What works for one leader will not work for another. If you want to become a leader you need to discover what it is about yourself that you can mobilise in a leadership context.

Do you mean to lead you need complete self-knowledge?

Jones: That's what a lot of the contemporary writing about leadership suggests. But, while it is undoubtedly very useful to have a great deal of emotional intelligence, for example, none of the leaders we have talked to or worked with have full self knowledge. Life and leadership aren't like that.

Goffee: What they do have is an overarching sense of purpose together with *sufficient* self knowledge of their potential →

→ leadership assets. They don't know it all, but they know *enough*.

Jones: That might sound a bit too pragmatic, but it is actually based on recognising three fundamental axioms about leadership. The first of these is that leadership is *situational*. What is required of the leader will always be influenced by the situation. Think of Rudy Giuliani in the wake of September 11 or Winston Churchill. In organisational life, hard edged, cost-cutting turnaround managers are often unable to offer leadership when there is a need to build.

Our second observation is that leadership is *non-hierarchical*. Reaching the top of an organisation does not make you a leader.

Hierarchy alone is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for the exercise of leadership.

Goffee: You could argue that the qualities which take you to the top of large-scale and often highly political organisations are not obviously the ones associated with leadership. People who make it to the top do so for a whole variety of reasons – including political acumen, personal ambition, time-serving, even nepotism – rather than real leadership quality.

So leadership is not the sole preserve of the chosen few.

Goffee: No. Great organisations have leaders at all levels. Successful organisations – be they hospitals, charities or commercial enterprises – seek to build leadership capability widely and to give people the opportunity to exercise it.

Jones: The third pillar of our view of leadership is that leadership is relational. Put simply, you cannot be a leader without followers. Leadership is a relationship built actively by both parties. This web of relationships is fragile and requires constant re-creation.

This doesn't mean that everything is always harmonious. It isn't. There may be an edge in relationships but that's because effective leaders know how to excite followers to become great performers.



Rob Goffee

What are the implications – at a very practical level – for those who aspire to leadership? What do they need to know and do?

Jones: The answer is simple, deceptively simple, in fact: to become a more effective leader, you must *be yourself – more – with skill*.

First, to be a leader you must *be yourself*. Look at Sir Richard Branson, the Virgin boss, and the way he uses his physical appearance – casual dress, long hair and a beard – to convey the informality and non-conformity which has become a central part of his leadership and, indeed, the Virgin brand. Followers want to be led by a person – not a role holder or a position-filler or a bureaucrat.

The leaders we studied were very adept at deploying their differences in ways that attract followers. Richard Branson's differences *signify* a message; they are *authentic* – not falsely manufactured; and they are *seen* by others. We are talking, then, not of *any* personal difference but of an artful and authentic display – often fine tuned over many years – of genuine differences which have the

potential to excite others.

Goffee: The link between self-knowledge and self-disclosure is a central – and increasingly fashionable – starting point for understanding effective leadership. But it is not everything. Leaders must be themselves *in context*. Great leaders are able to read the context and respond accordingly. They tap into what exists and bring *more* to the party. In management jargon, they add value. This involves a subtle blend of authenticity and adaptation; of individuality and conformity.

The thing with effective leaders is that do not simply react to context. They also shape it by conforming *enough*. This is the *skill* element. This involves knowing when and where to conform. Without this, leaders are unlikely to survive or make the connections they need to build successful relationships with others. To be effective, the leader needs to ensure his or her behaviours mesh sufficiently with the organisational culture to create traction. Leaders who fail to mesh will simply spin their wheels in isolation from their followers.

Can you explain what you mean by conforming enough?

Goffee: Leaders who succeed in changing organisations challenge the norms - but rarely all of them, all at once. They do not seek out instant head-on confrontation without understanding the organisational context. Indeed, survival (particularly in the early days) requires measured adaptation to an ongoing, established set of social relationships and networks. To change things the leader must first gain at least minimal acceptance as a member – and the rules for early survival are rarely the same as the rules for longer term success.

Jones: If you look around the corporate world there have been countless examples of CEOs who rode roughshod over organisational contexts. Sometimes they have reaped short-term gains. But, in the long-term, sustainable change requires that the leader understands and tunes into the organisational context. Having done so, the leader can instigate change with credibility and with a greater chance of success. Ignore it and the results can be disastrous. Think of Al Dunlap or the host of ruthless downsizers and asset strippers who conspicuously fail to deliver long-term change

Goffee: The question is: Who can read organisations well and how do they develop this skill? Clearly, some leaders are able to intuitively read

their context reading skills.

We have developed a way of understanding organisational context that is based on a view of organisations as communities. In our model, drawing heavily on classic sociology, there are two key cultural relationships – sociability and solidarity. Sociability refers primarily to affective relations between individuals who are likely to see each other as friends. They tend to share ideas and values and to associate with each other on equal terms. At its heart, sociability represents a relationship valued for its own sake. It is usually initiated through face-to-face contact, though it may be maintained through other forms of communication, and is characterised by high levels of mutual help. No real conditions are attached.

Solidarity, by contrast, describes task-focused cooperation between individuals and groups. It does not depend on close friendship or even personal acquaintance; neither does it need to be continuous. It arises only from a perception of shared interest – and, when this occurs, solidarity can produce intense focus.

Although this discussion may seem a little abstract, relationships of sociability and solidarity are actually all around us – in our families, sports teams, social clubs and communities. Arguably this ubiquity is what drew the attention of the early sociologists in the first place. In effect, we all have an

interest in – and are affected by – these relationships. Ask someone to describe their ideal family, for example, and typically they will tell you it is one where the members like and love one another – that's the sociability element – and which pulls together when times get tough – that's solidarity.

There are a lot of tensions and paradoxes at work here. The leader needs to be incredibly sensitive.

Jones: Yes, there are a lot of tensions – leaders must reveal strengths but show weaknesses; be an individual but conform enough; establish intimacy but keep their distance. Managing these tensions lies at the heart of successful leadership.

That's quite demanding. Wouldn't it be easier to imitate Jack Welch?

Goffee: The trouble is that even if that were possible, what works for Jack Welch won't work for you.

Our experience suggests excellence in one or two of these areas we've talked about is insufficient for truly inspirational leadership. It is the interplay between them, guided by situation sensing, that enables great leaders to find the right style for the right moment. In other words, every leader is unique.

Jones: And leadership is uniquely difficult. There is no point pretending that leadership is straightforward. Anyone who has ever been in a leadership position will tell you that it is complicated, demanding and full of personal risk. Clearly, not everyone can be a leader and there are many very talented individuals who are simply not interested in shouldering the responsibility of leadership. To assume that everyone has the sheer energy, drive and willpower required to offer inspirational leadership to others is facile. We argue that each individual has unique differences that potentially can be exploited in a leadership role. So, each of us has to address the blunt question: do we want it? And if we do, do we want it enough to put in the work required and make the necessary sacrifices?

Goffee: And then if you take on a leadership role you have to ask *Why should any one be led by you?* Why should *we* be led by you? Effective leaders must answer these questions every day in all they say and do. Otherwise the shortage of leaders will continue as their practice of leadership will be fatally flawed. ■

Great organisations have leaders at all levels.

situations largely on the back of many years experience in different contexts. They develop a kind of wisdom which means that they are less dependent on conceptual models to give them insight or even to guide their interventions. But are there universal principles which underlie organisational relationships and which might frame possibilities for change? We think there are. Our consulting work suggests that many people find models which refine