



Inquiring minds

In the latest in a series on good leadership, David Parmenter looks at the importance of learning-agility, the lifelong thirst for knowledge that all great leaders share

Few organisations have invested as much in creating a learning environment as the US multinational General Electric (GE). When Jack Welch took over as CEO of GE in 1981, he continued to support the Crotonville training centre for managers, which had been set up by his predecessors. His support went as far as insisting that he and his senior management team invest time and energy delivering workshops. Welch knew that the team would learn much from this 'downward mentoring'. It would help clarify concepts and energise them.

Great leaders have 'learning agility' – their thirst for knowledge keeps them constantly looking at ways to move their learning on. Welch was an avid reader of the financial press and management journals. His advice to leaders was 'read, read, read'. Yet many CFOs and financial controllers appear to believe there is no need to study leadership further. They know it all. This is isolating, foolish and career-limiting.

From an early age, the Antarctic explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton looked for experiences that he could use in later life. By the time he was 14, he was at sea as a cabin boy, observing both great and not-so-great captains. He sought to go on as many polar adventures as he could to prepare himself to get to the South Pole. This level of preparation can also be seen in the careers of the mountaineer Sir Edmund Hillary, wartime prime minister Sir Winston Churchill and many other eminent leaders. All experiences, whether good or bad, create valuable learning opportunities.

Right-brain thinking

One of management guru Peter Drucker's classic insights is to approach problems with your ignorance. By this he means that leaders, great leaders, do not regurgitate old methods for new processes. They are open to creative right-brain thinking and accept that 'what everybody knows is frequently wrong'.

Drucker's success as a consultant was down to approaching problems in this way. He would ask the dumb questions that got to the point. On meeting a CEO, when the opportunity was

right, he would ask, 'If you were not in the business, would you enter it now?' If a negative response followed, he would then ask, 'What are you going to do about it?'

Carmaker Toyota is famous for its use of the 'five whys', a problem-solving approach that works like peeling the layers off an onion. To each answer to a 'why' question, you then ask, 'Why is that?' The rule states that by the fifth 'why' you will have located the real problem and can then seek to rectify this.

Power of reinvention

Skilled leaders are constantly reinventing themselves. Welch's ability to reinvent himself and GE was pivotal to his success. He pursued not just one major initiative while he headed the conglomerate, but a whole host of initiatives, and focused attention on each of them.

Welch's leadership expertise grew and evolved through his many roles, the courses he attended, his exposure to Drucker's thinking (Welch called Drucker the greatest management thinker of the last century), and the management training he personally delivered.

Next steps

1. Email me at parmenter@waymark.co.nz for a checklist to develop learning agility
2. Check out the following books on leadership: *The Definitive Drucker* (Elizabeth Haas Edersheim); *Winning* (Jack and Suzy Welch); *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies* (Tom Peters and Robert H. Waterman)
3. Use the 'five whys' when you are next tasked with finding the root cause of a problem. ■

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