

Leadership from the Inside

Sir John Whitmore



John Whitmore is rated as the number one business coach by the UK *Independent* newspaper. John has personally trained top executives and leaders in many of the world's top companies. He is particularly interested in promoting major culture change in business to keep up with the accelerating pace of change in society.

Sustainability and leadership are inseparable. All around us, in the corporate world or in the world of politics, we see failed leadership or an absence of leadership, and of sustainability. In the last two decades, multiple challenges associated with globalization, technological advance, instant communication and environmental issues have swamped leaders. Many, driven into overwhelm and fear, have been unable to cope and have fallen short of expectations, and too many have turned to dubious practices – or corporate crime, if we tell it like it is.

A few emerging leaders, fortunately an increasing number, have responded to these challenges with courage, and importantly with introspection; and have become both ethically exemplary and financially successful, when these two qualities were often regarded as contradictory in the past. Likewise, the skills needed to make a lot of money would seem far removed from the development of higher ethics. We can view them as a simple duality between what is quantitative (head) and what is qualitative (heart).

Human thinking and personal development, in the capitalist world at least, has been quantitatively focused, so we seek more skills and intellectual achievement and fail to develop our qualitative depth – our ethics, discrimination and emotional intelligence.

That distorted progression has gone too far. The balance must be restored, and urgently – if we are to survive. New leaders must develop their values, their ethics and their vision, their sense of responsibility for the whole, not just for their patch, their company, or their country, but for the whole planet. This embraces all forms of social and environmental awareness and responsibility. Leaders must be agile and able to embrace change as it occurs; they must be authentic, as anything less is ineffectual and increasingly transparent.

Do people learn these things in business school? No, or at best superficially. Are people born with them? Some are, but not many.

In Jim Collins's important book, *From Good to Great*, he identifies the qualities of the leaders of 1,435 Fortune 500 companies and only 11 qualified at Level 5, the highest category (see diagram). The dominant characteristics of those top leaders were 'humility' and 'will'. They equate to the twin principles of coaching – awareness and responsibility – that are being increasingly sought as a management style, and for personal development, in the corporate environment. Can these qualities be learned? Yes, but not through an academic approach.

Personal psychological development through experiential or non-rational techniques is necessary to access the subconscious mind and emotions, and clear out the 'internal obstacles' to the full expression of potential.

The whole business paradigm is one of fear, and one that ensures poor performance. In our externally focused western culture we fail to recognise that we are our own worst enemies. Once the internal obstacles are overcome the external issues are easy to deal with! Leaders need to work on their psychological self-development instead of pumping themselves up with skills and knowledge that they are unable to apply effectively.

Aspiring leaders need qualitative inner work, deep personal or, dare I say it, psycho-spiritual development. Once solid foundations are in place then the outer skills are easy to acquire, maintain and use responsibly. That is real leadership. Take a look at today's corporate and political leaders through that frame and see how well they measure up. Is it any wonder that the world is in a mess? *JW*

5 Level 5 Executive

Builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will.

4 Effective Leader

Catalyzes commitment to and vigorous pursuit of a clear and compelling vision, stimulating higher performance standards.

3 Competent Manager

Organises people and resources toward the effective and efficient pursuit of predetermined objectives.

2 Contributing Team Member

Contributes individual capabilities to the achievement of group objectives and works effectively with others in a group setting.

1 Highly Capable Individual

Makes productive contributions through talent, knowledge, skills and good work habits.