

The Royal Society of Medicine

Daedalus Trust

Selection, coaching and mentoring

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John began by saying that his talk would be a little different from the others as it is from a very personal perspective, about success, unlocking potential, and developing confidence as well as bullying, porn and murder.

He suggested it was all common sense, but that common sense isn't very common, citing an institution buying a bank without doing proper due diligence, a senior executive declaring "I want to get my life back" when his company had just left 11 people dead, and mortgage providers lending customers more than the value of a house without checking their ability to pay.

The leader of an organisation sets the tone, culture and reputation and their style will be determined by their values and above all else their behaviour. Leaders have status, authority, power, support staff, expense account, salary and bonuses, lifestyle and lawyers to protect it, so little wonder if life in this 'bubble' causes personality and behavioural changes.

A friend of John's had a successful banking career until she questioned the very high targets set by a new boss. She was let go almost immediately at a cost of over a million pounds. Not long afterwards the new boss was fired for not delivering but landed a job in another bank – and so the saga goes on – who pays for all this – at the end of the day it's you and me!

In this sort of culture whistle blowers get fired, accountants who won't sign off the accounts get moved. Questioning is seen as dissent or sabotage yet it is essential. How do you resist becoming disconnected from the real world and avoid the perils of Hubris? Lehman Brothers' former CEO was apparently nicknamed the Gorilla and proudly had a stuffed gorilla in his office.

Organisational leadership is a moral activity. It is about obligations and confronting rather than avoiding ethical dilemmas. An organisation's culture is a Main Board responsibility. As an engineer John said he firmly believes that what isn't measured isn't managed, but sees the recent infatuation with highly focused targets and bonus achievement solely linked to numbers as out of balance.

Highly specific quantifiable targets have often caused people to narrow their span of attention, lose their moral compass and with the wider context. Concentrating excessively on the bottom line or short term growth can damage the long-term survival prospects of the business by neglecting relationships with customers, the public and shareholders. Trust, Judgement and integrity are very important but do not lend themselves to measurement.

Demonstrating the right behaviour, values and ethics that delivers trust and integrity is of

fundamental importance. In her book "The Right Thing", Sally Bibb breaks trust down into six elements - Capability, Consistency, Reliability, Integrity, Caring and Independent thought. Integrity is made up from Honesty, Sincerity, Empathy, Congruence, Humility, and finally Courage. Courage is required to do the right thing even when it's hard, risky and is one of the reasons why the leadership role can be a very lonely one. Courage means different things to different people but, above all, it implies an ability to do and say what you mean, especially when faced with adversity.

Management guru Jim Collins' advice to "Get the right people on the bus" is arguably the most important job of a manager. John suggested that selection should focus importantly on the "how" and "why", because it's much easier to hire people who have high moral standards than to try to change those who haven't. Hiring for ethics is crucially important. If you hire someone who wants to become very rich before they are 30, using other people's money, you had better know what they are up to.

Life at the top is full of paradoxes and difficulties. You are paid to see the big picture but you know that the devil is in the detail. You must think long term, but you may be in post only a few years. You are in charge but must delegate. You must have conviction, but you know life is uncertain and the unexpected happens. You must keep things simple but not be simplistic, deal quickly with mistakes, but avoid a blame culture and cover ups, drive change, innovation and improvement, but stay positive about the present, make time for thinking, but always be ready for action.

In his 40 years in the oil and gas industry up to being a CEO John has been blown off his feet by an explosion in Fawley, nearly gassed by cyanide in Teesside and had to deal with a very large fire in Milford Haven. As an Executive Director he became involved in managing subsidiaries and buying businesses. One day he was told that a spot check on one of their products had found it to be faulty. Thousands of them were in use all over the country with no apparent problems. The highest priority was safety and they had a well earned image and reputation to protect. Should they stay quiet and hope for the best? They went public in the trade journals and did a product recall – the first in the firm's 60 year history. It cost £200,000 but there were no accidents and no adverse reactions from customers.

On another occasion someone outside the company called John saying they and their family had been threatened by a member of staff. After reflection John dismissed the staff members, even though it cost them £60,000 at a tribunal. Several of his colleagues thanked John for removing him, they had all been bullied by him, and they had all been scared and hated coming to work. No one but no one should have to endure what they had been through.

John has now been self-employed for 10 years mentoring people running businesses and in the high performance system at UK Sport. He believes that to avoid hubris, stay grounded, keep in touch with reality, exhibit the right values, behave ethically and make better decisions we need to look in the mirror unflinchingly and with analytical zeal, and that we need a mentor to help us do this.

Mentoring encourages reflection to help an individual develop potential beyond their current performance or role over the longer term. The most common mentoring topics are: making things happen; having difficult conversations; dealing with difficult people (sometimes their boss); dealing with difficult situations ranging from their whole job to specific areas or a moral dilemma.

A mentor must be ready for the unexpected. Having asked one mentee to list all the jobs and tasks that they had on their plate at the moment so that they could prioritise and organise their work load – there was no response – except for the tears running down their face. On another occasion a mentee volunteered that their admin budget had been blown by a subordinate who had run up a 22,000 mobile phone bill while abroad. An investigation prompted by the mentoring discussion, proved that pornography downloading was the cause. The end result was that without publicity the subordinate left the company and started a two year jail sentence.

Mentoring involves difficult conversations. One employee was arrested for a sexual assault involving the children of another employee. John persuaded him to resign and leave immediately in a difficult conversation. Sadly a few years later he murdered two people.

Mentoring has a role in all walks of life, not just business. As part of UK Sport's high performance programme John has mentored many people including three Performance Directors. All three produced Olympic medallists, two gold and a bronze, two of these ended a medals famine that had lasted decades. One involved a 10 year plan – gold came after 8 years. They were very competitive, analytical, self critical and they pursued even the smallest improvement. The winners were proud and delighted – in spite of the adulation none professed to be "masters of the universe".

John summed up mentoring with a quote from a mentee: "mentoring gives me a safe space to talk about work – it makes me more confident.

He then concluded by reading a poem: The Contract by William Ayot in the form of a message from those that we lead.

The Contract

And in the end we follow them-
Not because we are paid,
Not because we might see some advantage,
Not because of the things that they have accomplished,
Not even because of the dreams they dream,
But simply because of who they are:
The man, the woman, the leader the boss,
Standing up there when the waves hit the rock,
Passing out faith and confidence like life jackets,
Knowing the currents, holding the doubts,
Imagining the delights and terrors of every landfall;
Captain, pirate, and parent by turns,
The bearer of our countless hopes and expectations,
We give them our trust. We give them our effort.
What we ask in return is that they stay true.

Respondent

John Rowson

Director, Social Brain Project, Royal Society of Arts

John Rowson began by citing Paul Watzlawick and his notions of first and second order change. Watzlawick described a first order change as change that appears to be common sense or "more of the same", whereas the second order change often appears weird, unexpected, puzzling or paradoxical.

He also talked about the notion of a psychological immune system, which acts to prevent change – even change that we may wish.

He cited the work of Ian McGilchrist on the distinct personalities of the left and right brain and how this goes beyond previous simplistic notions of hemispherical specialism in the brain. He mentioned that a left hemisphere bias is commonly associated with hubris, and that hubris may also be related to tempo – we are too busy to find time to reflect.

He concluded by mentioning the work of Edgar Schein, in particular his concept of career anchors and how in the health service these are likely to differ between clinicians and managers.