



# IMI TALENT FORUM 3

TALENT THAT DERAILS: THE BRIGHT & DARK SIDE OF LEADERSHIP

JUNE 2016



IRISH MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

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## INTRODUCTION

The first IMI Talent Forum brought together Ireland's leading talent practitioners and shared with them the insights gathered from the very successful Crossrail Project in the UK; a unique organisation designed to form, develop and disband in six years to deliver a large capital infrastructure project – a new underground line in London.

The second forum challenged our thinking and beliefs around the concept of 'talent management' itself.

Following on neatly from this, the **third talent forum, led by Professor Adrian Furnham, Department of Psychology, University College London** challenged our perceptions of leadership and in particular the derailers of leadership. Those derailers are things that we can easily identify with the benefit of hindsight but is it possible to pre-empt the derailing of a chosen leader?

We all love to speak about leadership. We regale each other with stories of great leaders and we nod knowingly at the lessons from the top of failed leaders. We want to be the star of the former and avoid the latter – therefore the standard literature available to us all follows the approach of explaining 'how to' be a leader – but have we been looking at it from a too positively partisan a point of view?

### What differentiates good, great...and bad leaders?

In a traditional career path, we hire to do 'stuff' – we recruit and select for technical ability, knowledge and skill. If our choice happens to be good at that, we whisk them away out of their area of expertise to a position of management. Finally, they will rise to a position of true, strategic leadership as a consequence of fast-tracking, reputation, ambition and history. Historically, it has been all too rare to look at the 'soft stuff'; the 'interpersonal domain' from The Primary Colours Model of Leadership below:



In the whistle-stop process described above, how many of the 'interpersonal domain' dimensions do we truly mine for good, reliable and predictive data?

## The Talented, Agile, Engaging Leader

Adrian challenged some of the traditional thinking behind leadership which has been shaped by our acceptance of what a good leader is – we know enough about general management and leadership but we don't know how what transitions a technical expert into a strategic leader. Generally, the required skills are the ability to **think strategically, deliver results, build high performance teams, be emotionally intelligent**, come with a **good reputation** and **credibility** while being a **master of their business environment**.

In assessing the leaders of our working worlds, we often turn to the oft-used, less often understood realm of talent management. We strive to attract, retain and develop talent in all of our organisations and we generally do so using some assessment of ability/intelligence and personality. Intelligence or ability is a powerful predictor of success and we can also measure personality. In addition to this we seek to understand what motivates people and the personal values they hold, but these are harder to pin down. What drives people and motivates them can't be measured; in most cases they can't even tell you themselves. Adrian went further and suggested that a true picture could only be achieved by delving into the life story, physical health, job history and reputation of an individual to truly assess their potential to live up to perceived talent.

Commonplace assessment tools such as a 'nine box grid' measuring performance and potential purports to use data to put people in a box. The data and measures used are distinctly wobbly however – such that the grid merely justifies our prejudices under the guise of data.

In Adrian's research, he has sought to make tangible that which we cannot and in many cases simply do not want to see. The research highlighted six key bright-side dimensions of success for talented people at work.

- Top of the list in almost all cases was **conscientiousness** – the drive and diligence that we see in the best of those around us.
- **Curiosity** – the most brilliant brains always want to learn, they want to understand how and why something works the way it does. They're not afraid to embrace the new and try new things.
- **Approach to risk** and the willingness to accept and deal with adversity around them
- Resilience to the impact of stressors in their environment called **stress reactivity** – how prone to stress they are
- Being able to make sense of mixed and variable standards of information and situations comes through in the **tolerance of ambiguity** dimension
- Finally, the need to achieve and exceed one's own performance in the form of **competitiveness**.

The central premise of Adrian's workshop on the day was to explore the dark side of these otherwise very bright traits – what happens when your leader has 'too much of a good thing?'

### What factors cause derailment?

What do we mean when we talk about 'derailment'? We are really talking about those leaders whose competitiveness, risk approach, conscientiousness etc. takes them into a development and promotion track but at a certain level and stage, something goes wrong. They are not incompetent, for they would not have progressed so far but

- **Incompetence:** Not having enough of some important characteristic e.g. intelligence, stability, conscientiousness
- **Derailment:** Usually having too much of a characteristic e.g. self-confidence

In a 2013 study of America's top-paid CEOs<sup>1</sup>, almost 40% of the CEOs on the highest-paid lists were eventually "bailed out, booted, or busted". Adrian challenged the audience to consider how does it happen that so many leaders could get to the top of very serious organisations, and still fail?

If you ask people to list what causes bad leadership, the following are what crop up all of the time:

1. Persistent people problems
2. Poor emotional control
3. Over-controlling
4. Poor task performance
5. Poor organisation, planning and communication
6. Rumour-mongering and inappropriate use of information
7. Procrastination
8. Failure to consider human needs
9. Failure to coach and develop talent

And if you ask successful CEOs at the end of their career what helped them most in their success – they will tell you that it was the experience of either a) good leadership or, b) bad leadership in addition to being assigned 'stretch tasks', not to test them but to teach them. They had a model of learning leadership – either a good one to imitate or a bad one to avoid.

Bad leadership will clear the path for disenchantment amongst the ranks and so the fruits of bad leadership will be manifest.

So what really causes derailment? What is the underlying psychological state that could be used as a predictor of future derailment? Adrian suggested looking at a number of areas, three things that are dark side predictors of derailment and that **when you are considering someone for a position of leadership, you should be finding out:**

#### **Troubled relationships:**

- Inability to establish and maintain healthy, functional relationships. Is there a history? Is there destruction in their wake?

#### **Self image:**

- A defective, unstable or non-integrated sense of self.

#### **Major changes that require adaptation:**

- Versatile leaders rise to the challenge but derailleurs get stressed, become rigid and defensive, and behave inappropriately.

Key derailment behaviours are exacerbated in times of change, complexity or uncertainty – leaders susceptible to derailment will fall back on what they know, they will exaggerate what were previously held as strengths such that they become weaknesses and so the dark side of personality comes out...

So why are we getting it wrong, so often? Adrian has highlighted three fundamental issues – (i) we are always looking for reasons to select rather than deselect; (ii) we assume that competencies will directly lead to success and (iii) we don't look at the darkness beyond bright side traits or the brightness beyond dark side traits. Using the example of military selection – a captain of a nuclear submarine is selected with a heavy emphasis on the kind of traits that are not wanted as opposed to

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<sup>1</sup> Andersen, S., Klinger, S., & Pizzigati, S. (2013). Executive Excess 2013; Bailed out, booted, busted. A twenty year review of America's top-paid CEOs. <http://www.ips-dc.org/executive-excess-2013/> Accessed 21/06/2016

the easier task of the traits that are wanted – but identifying when, for example, confidence strays into uncomfortable arrogance is not being carried out effectively in our current approach.

Adrian posits that every human characteristic save for a couple of exceptions is normally distributed; but we are calibrated to think that an individual either has or hasn't got 'something'. In reality, a spectrum exists, including a tipping point from optimum level to a dark side.

### Errors upon errors – so what can be done?

Given all that we know about successful and failed leaders, you might think that organisations would have begun to sort through and learn from errors however the very make-up of our way of working leads to a fair share of chasing our own shadows. High flyers are anointed and appointed, their faults and limitations are forgiven until they are fast tracked to jobs beyond their capability where their limitations become noticed quickly but all too late to stave off failure.

So what can be done?

- Examine your own leadership pipeline and selection process – have you really considered your data and your measures?
- Understand competencies and their *potential* dark sides.
  - E.g. when does being 'innovative' become a waste of time and money by being impractical?
- Remember the concept of optimal (not maximal)
  - What's the 'just right' amount for your leaders?
- Consider biodata
  - There are patterns in a person's history, early life events have been shown to have deep impact far beyond expected
  - As a talent manager, you should be looking to find out what future leaders are trying to hide –
- Beware the halo-effect of strengths
- Beware fast-tracking without proper research – get independent insight, encourage 360° degree appraisal
- Consider supporting your leaders with complementary personalities and styles – build a leadership team

### Summary

A laundry list of suggestions, but questions to consider are many – what does this look like for your particular organisation? Can you retrofit this insight onto your corporate culture or is this day zero of future-proofing your organisation by implementing a more holistic leadership process?

Whatever way that you choose to look at it; there is one certainty. Understanding and developing great leaders is one of the most important things we can do in any organisation.

