

Moving Up

By Satnam Brar, Maximus

Once upon a time, the process of moving up the career ladder was relatively straightforward. You did your job conscientiously, tried not to fall out with your colleagues or superiors, kept up with the latest technical developments and, in due course, you could expect to be promoted. But now the ERP workplace has become more complicated and the whole business of moving up, increasingly challenging.

To be a successful manager in the 21st century calls for much more than technical competence and the ability to steer clear of trouble. Today's ERP specialists who want to get away from the 'coal face' need a whole range of extra skills, such as the ability to communicate effectively, to network both within a corporate environment and the wider Oracle community and a clear appreciation of how their work will integrate with and contribute to the commercial operations of their employers.

In modern businesses, the best managers are successful because they are good at building relationships downwards, upwards and sideways across organisations and technical communities. It is, therefore, a pity that personal networking is something at which we here in the UK are still singularly bad, particularly in contrast to our cousins across the Atlantic who seem to have been taught it from birth. Yet the ability to put together a group of individuals who can help you to perform more effectively on both a tactical and strategic level is becoming increasingly important and relatively simple to learn given the right motivation. The key is to realise that effective networking is based on two simple pillars – the fact that most people actually like being asked for their opinions and assistance and an appreciation that the process works best when it is based on mutual benefit or good, old-fashioned 'give and take'. Successful networkers are consequently not afraid to ask for help and they also take every opportunity to offer assistance to those who might be able to return the favour in the future. If you want to see an example of a master

at work in this art, rent or buy yourself a copy of 'The Godfather' (just ignore the bit about beheading racehorses, shooting people who upset you in restaurants, etc).

However, what might be termed 'traditional' management skills may be insufficient to move you upwards as fast as you might like these days. Now, particularly if you have your sights set on the board room or the partnership table, it's important to be more than just a simple manager, good at organising, directing and achieving objectives. Now you also need to be a *leader*.

A cynic might suggest that this is simply dressing up the same thing under a different name. However, while there are obviously a number of common elements to being a manager and being a leader, the key extra element is perhaps best highlighted by the dictionary definition, which, amongst other things, describes a leader as 'someone who guides or inspires others.' At its best, leadership can achieve much more than simple management. In a survey of fifty global companies, the research firm ISR found a direct link between effective leadership and commercial performance. In organisations where their superiors received an 'average' leadership rating from employees, sales improved over the course of a year by just over 6%. But in organisations where they were rated highly, sales rose by more than 10%. Why? Perhaps because as the historian, Correlli Barnett puts it, leadership is *"a psychological force that has nothing to do with morals or good character or even intelligence: nothing to do with ideals or idealism. It is a matter of*



relative will powers, a basic connection between one animal and the rest of the herd. Leadership is not imposed like authority. It is actually welcomed and wanted by the led."

So, given how important leadership qualities obviously are, do you have to be born with them, like the ability to sing well or paint great pictures, or can they be learned? Some of the world's major business schools have set up specific leadership departments which ostensibly suggests that you can learn how to lead in the classroom. But the real picture is much more ambiguous. According to Professor David Sims of the Cass Business School in London, "We have come to the conclusion that the idea of the 'born leader' does not stand up; born to lead what, when and with whom? The idea of leaders being 'made' is equally romantic – nobody knows how to 'make' a leader."

Perhaps, therefore, the best way to develop leadership skills is to recognise your own inherent abilities and then hone them in the 'front line' of the workplace. And the most efficient and effective way of doing this is to watch out for the successes and failures of those around you. Having done just that for more years than I care to remember, here is my basic checklist of what makes a good leader:

- 1) Communication – The ability to get your message across in a clear, effective and emotive way can take you a long way. Just look at the example of Ronald Reagan if you want to see how far!

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Correlli Barnett

- 2) Clarity – People like to know what is expected of them and what objectives they and the wider organisation are aiming for.
- 3) Decision – Good leaders do not vacillate. Be clear about what you think and where you are going.
- 4) Adaptability – At the same time you need to be flexible enough to react to new challenges and opportunities. As John Lennon once said, “Life is what happens to you while you are making other plans.”
- 5) Approachability – Stay approachable and be seen to be part of the team. An open door policy will encourage your team to communicate openly and honestly with you at all times, which will make management and direction a lot easier.
- 6) Sensitivity – Make sure that you know if your people are not happy. Try to be sensitive to their needs and expectations. Anticipate their moves and act accordingly.
- 7) Vision – A certain amount of vision and the ability to see the bigger picture, is vital for any successful leader. You have to be able to identify the problems of tomorrow today.
- 8) Example – Expect from others what you expect from yourself. Leaders belong at the front, not at the back.



charge as little as £5,000 (not too bad if you say it quickly!), two years at one of the world's leading schools, Wharton in the USA, will leave you with little change from £40,000. However, they can pay off. An MBA can definitely make a difference to your future earning power, particularly if you are willing to make the investment in studying at a world-class school. MBAs from London Business School, for example, report their earnings rising by 189% in the three years after graduation and graduates of the Said school at Oxford University by 145%. Overall, the average reported salary and bonus package for new MBAs jumped 10% last year to a record

I'd got enough technical knowledge but I wanted to understand the complexities of integration at a higher level,” he says. “I wanted to learn how to manage people and finance and how to most effectively direct the whole process of change.”

“What an executive MBA, which you study around your day job, does is allow you to apply what you learn as you go along. It gives you the self-assurance to stand up to people and say ‘we should really do it this way’. Too many IT specialists get sidelined or compartmentalised by others with what I might charitably call ‘more confidence’ because their knowledge is deep instead of wide. The MBA certainly cures that – I think several of my colleagues have been quite taken aback with all the new ideas I come out with now! Of course it is tremendously hard work, particularly with the demands of a stressful job and a young family to deal with as well, but I have no regrets about it. It really does make you a more rounded person and a much more effective business manager.”

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The need for ERP specialists to appreciate the wider business picture outside their technical remit means that an MBA (Masters in Business Administration) degree is increasingly being touted as a route out of purely technical work and into more strategic management. But what exactly does it entail? While there are a host of programmes on offer from business schools both at home and overseas, two UK institutions – UCE in Birmingham and London Metropolitan, now provide dedicated courses aimed at IT professionals, whilst oil company BP has even developed an in-house IT MBA programme for its staff. However MBAs are not for the faint hearted. They are hard work and they also do not come cheap. While there are schools in Europe that

£65,000 just ahead of the previous 2001 peak. For those willing to take the time and effort involved, the financial returns can therefore be very handsome indeed.

However, money is certainly not all that an MBA can provide. ERP specialist, Ahmed Zaman, learned his trade at that former darling of the international telecommunications industry, Worldcom, handling implementations across Europe, the Middle East and Africa until his wife, tired of his long, work-related absences, “...told me to get a proper job.” Taking up the post of Director of Business Systems at City University in London, Ahmed became interested in the executive MBA run by the university's business school, Cass. “I'd got to the point where I thought

About the Author



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