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Learning skills for leadership

Good leaders have ability, benevolence and integrity.
John Cradden reports

The long-running debate over whether the best leaders are born or made continues, but many people can learn to become good leaders through a combination of experience and education, says Paul O'Sullivan, dean and director of the College of Business at **DIT**.

A large body of research on leadership challenges the popular perception that some people are born with a natural capacity to lead, and if you're not one of them there's not much you can do about it.

"Some research suggests leadership is about a quarter genetic and three-quarters developed or learned," says O'Sullivan. "No doubt certain people are born with traits which help them along the way. Some people are naturally charismatic, ambitious and intelligent, for example."

However, he adds, charisma is not always a positive thing and some people can be overly ambitious in a way that undermines others, and their emotional intelligence may not be as high as their IQ.

"I firmly believe people can develop leadership potential over time and strong educational programmes play a vital role. Such programmes can build on, and integrate with, work experience so participants strengthen their knowledge and skills."

"These programmes also provide a platform for reflection, an opportunity for participants to take time out to think about the types of leaders, good and bad, they have encountered and the type of leader they want to become."

Personal profiling can be very useful for identifying strengths and weaknesses and heighten self-awareness. "These things can help to build confidence and people's belief that they are capable of becoming effective leaders, and confidence is extremely important when you are in a leadership role."

The importance of emotional intelli-



gence in leadership – people who can understand and manage their emotions and who can connect with people both inside and outside the business – has been highlighted by the work of well-known US psychologist Daniel Goleman and others.

"A strong strategy and clear vision will not be enough if a leader cannot communicate effectively and if people cannot relate to the leader," says O'Sullivan. Being able to build the trust essential to running successful businesses also draws on emotional intelligence. "Given the pace of business, leaders cannot control every aspect of the business. They must create a space for employees to thrive, but this will only happen if they trust others within the business. Trust must flow in both directions."

Given how staff turnover can rise when the economy is performing well, there may be many situations today with huge pressure on a new leader to build this all-important trust quickly. O'Sullivan says the Ability, Benevolence, Integrity (ABI) model proposed by US management professor Roger Mayer and his colleagues in 1995 is still relevant today. This model underlines how people want to know they are following someone who is competent, who cares for their welfare and who is honest and reliable.

"The speed at which trust develops can depend on a number of factors. Even the most trustworthy of leaders can struggle to gain the trust of others if there is a low trust

Paul O'Sullivan of DIT: "A strong strategy and clear vision will not be enough if a leader cannot communicate effectively."

culture within the organisation, if third parties give them bad reviews, or indeed if the trustor has a low disposition to trust. New leaders must seek to demonstrate ability, benevolence and integrity as soon as possible, to communicate openly and honestly and behave in a consistent manner."

Difficulties in finding new leaders or failing to identify potential leaders can result in many employees being promoted to management by virtue of high competencies in technical or functional roles, "but this can be a fatal mistake if the person does not have leadership capabilities or the willingness to further develop themselves", says O'Sullivan.

"In fact, it can be a double whammy for organisations who may, for example, promote their top sales person into a leadership role. If this person is not right for the job, the company not only loses their sales but can lose further sales if team members are dissatisfied with their new leader."

"In my experience those who succeed in leadership have an ability to build strong relationships, are seen as trustworthy, and make up for any knowledge or skills gaps by surrounding themselves with the right people."