

Becoming a Great Leader



How do you become a great leader? It's not about being the top dog in management or commanding the highest post in the corporate echelon, but more about engaging with and empowering the people around you, said **Michael Simpson**, Senior Consultant and Executive Coach for the Franklin Covey Group Leadership and Execution Practice.

T rue leadership is not about being the boss or manager to your underlings, but an inspirational and empowering figure to all the people around you.

'Our job as leaders is to create the conditions to enable greatness in people. Greatness exists in all people,' said Michael Simpson, Senior Consultant and Executive Coach for the Franklin Covey Group Leadership and Execution Practice in a recent interview. Simpson was in Kuala Lumpur to coach the Leadership seminar based on the *8th Habit Book - From Effectiveness to Greatness* organised by Leadership Resources. He is also the Global Director of Franklin Covey's Executive Coaching Services in partnership with Columbia University. Franklin Covey is perhaps best-known for their executive coaching services utilising the works of Dr. Stephen Covey who wrote *Seven Habits of Highly Successful People* and more recently *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*.

'Leadership is really about seeing the unseen capability of people so clearly that they'll believe in it themselves,' added Simpson. 'Thus, great leadership becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.'



Michael Simpson

What are the some of the traits of a highly effective leader? **One, they are proactive, not reactive.** They are responsible and they make informed choices that determine their destiny. They overcome negative culture, whereas bad leaders are reactive, complaining, and criticising and typically victims of culture.'

Two, great leaders also have a clear and compelling purpose. Instead of being aimless, they are able to visualise their goals and to communicate them to others, and to unify others in pursuit of this vision. Furthermore, their goals are linked to the overarching goals and pur-

pose of their organisation. Great leaders are also very focused on the wildly important goals. 'Based on research we've seen looking at about 350,000 leaders worldwide, leaders don't know the goals of the organisation. There are either too many goals, they're too broad, they're too vague, they're not measurable, or they may be conflicting and competing.'

'So a leader needs to first have no more than one to three wildly important goals per team at any given time.'

Three, they have their priorities straight, which is linked to the trait of focusing on wildly important goals. 'They put first things first, they don't put urgent things first.'

Four, they think win-win. 'They have a mentality of 'abundance' whereby they create opportunities for others. Mediocre leaders think in a 'scarcity' mindset where they have to protect their turf, their title and power. But it's hard to come from an abundance mindset if you lack security.'

Five, leadership is not about titles, but about influence. 'Leaders can emerge at any level of the organisation. What is important is your moral influence and your authority.' Gandhi is a compelling example of a leader with no formal

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position but great moral influence. ‘Ask yourself how am I shoring up the people I lead? Am I there to raise them up? Do they trust me? Many people never become great leaders because they might be really good at managing but they are not good at creating opportunities for others.’

But is it possible to practise great leadership within a culture of negativity? While it would be an uphill battle, Simpson believes that the ‘world desperately needs leaders who can stand apart from the weaknesses of the organisation and of bosses. The world needs leaders who can create trust, who can remove bureaucracy and who can maximise talent and capabilities. You need to step apart from bureaucracy, influence the system and create hope so that other people will follow.’

‘Leaders need to know that what we do is ultimately more important than what we say. We need to focus on how we show up as a leader and we certainly need to build credibility and trustworthiness with those we seek to influence. Trust becomes critical. It is the one thing that impacts everything as a leader – who we are, what our values are, what we stand for – that really becomes that anchor.’

To earn trust, leaders also need to be competent. ‘It boils down to two things, our capabilities and our results. Capabilities are our skills, our talents, our judgements, all those things that we bring to the table. Our results are, ‘Do we deliver the goods? Can we deliver the goods?’

Six, great leadership is participative, where you engage with people around you. ‘Traditional leadership is micro-managing and controlling. If people are protecting their job, they’re disengaging. You want to create a legacy rather than an empire.’

Seven, they are able to balance courage and consideration. ‘Leadership requires you to be courageous around scoreboards and goals and considerate to culture. You have to be courageous to achieve objectives by setting standards and challenging people to reach them. And you have to be considerate, sensitive and supportive to power

issues and cultural dynamics.’

Eight, you have to behave with accountability and principles. Simpson points out that the Great Financial Crisis of 2009 was proof that people had lost their principles and were behaving with

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arrogance, pride and wickedness. On the bright side, ‘the collapse has made people softer and humble. When people start losing money and market share, they take a step back and ask questions, they are more introspective. They are seeking a more ethical way based on principle-centred leadership and this is happening in politics, government and business.’

However, certain factors may stand in the way of great leadership. One is vision, where ‘a wrong or misaligned vision won’t get you to where you want to go.’ The second is feedback which gets filtered on the way to the top. The third is complacency, where you become comfortable and neglect your responsibility to the people and stakeholders that you serve. ‘Your organisation doesn’t have an inherent right to exist. You need to seek and maintain your legitimacy. If you take care of people’s needs, then you have earned

the right to stay and the right to lead.’

Therefore, great leaders have to check their vision and align all their people behind it. They have to ensure that they are getting honest feedback. And they have to practise *kaizen* or an attitude of continuous improvement and remain humble and selfless in the process.

These recommendations are aligned with the four imperatives of the eight habit of great leadership, which are to build trust, clarify purpose, align systems and unleash talent. By building trust, you gain the legitimacy to lead. By clarifying purpose, you unify your people behind a common vision. Meanwhile, performance measurement systems enable the process of leadership and management to become measurable. ‘You are looking at goals and how to align people to achieve these goals. How are you managing teams and individuals and holding them accountable?’ By providing clear, visible scoreboards that showcase weekly progress, you can offer a realistic assessment of current results that enables every employee to understand how success is measured and how their efforts measure up. ‘It is imperative that team members know whether they are winning or losing every week; semiannual, quarterly or even monthly reviews come too infrequently or too late for timely course correction on this year’s critical goals,’ said Simpson.

Putting all these conditions in place can unleash talent, which brings us back to the point made earlier, that great leadership is about creating the conditions to enable greatness in all people.

Business is placing greater demands on accountants and financial professionals. Apart from providing traditional financial and assurance services via the finance function, accountants are now expected to take on strategic and leadership roles in business. To help accountants flourish in this new regime, MIA strongly urges its members to participate in more strategic, execution and leadership development courses, such as those conducted by Franklin Covey. ■