

Self-Awareness – The Vital Factor

Questions that define leadership success

Michael Harrison

There is an abundance of difference between the few leaders and the many led. One is crucial. You may think the answer is obvious – success. But that is the result, not the difference itself.

As I travel the world meeting people in every walk of life one thing stands out. Leaders know what they want and how to get it.

This is because firstly they know themselves, and secondly they never forget the formula that governs all our lives. Time!

We all know there are only 24 hours a day, just 1440 minutes. If you are today celebrating your 30th birthday you have 15,768,000 minutes – plus a few for leap years – before retirement at 60. It seems a lot. But if you want to be financially independent at 45, you now have only 7,884,000 minutes to go. Only! It still seems a lot. But like the unsold hotel room or the empty airline seat, once the opportunity to use it is lost, it can never be recovered.

By the time you have read this one of those minutes has already ticked by. If you have grasped the impact of this statement, it has literally been one of the most profitable minutes you have ever spent. Whatever, it has gone, never to return.

By now you may think that what I am talking about is the need to set targets and be organised, making the optimum use of the time available. Once again that is so but, once again, it is the result, not the difference itself.

The conspicuous difference of successful people in all walks of life is their regular review of their own capabilities, which is driven by honest self-assessment.

It doesn't matter what it is that you want, to live a life of carefree leisure from 45 or younger, or to work until the end because you genuinely enjoy doing so and find it fulfilling, I can assert two things with absolute confidence. You want to be independent. You want to be the one who calls the shots.

It can be done and it begins with self-assessment.

In business, planning starts with a SWOT analysis. The team meets to discuss the businesses strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The problem with this process is that most companies I have worked with only do it intermittently, usually only once a year.

Developing those capabilities that make the leadership difference requires a similar process followed with regular continuity. Self-assessment is your personal declaration of independence and all it takes is a few questions answered honestly on a regular basis. But the key is to ask the right questions and to ask them regularly.

There is an old saying that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Mindful of those ticking minutes, let's begin the journey.

How would you assess your performance over the past month?

Start with a blank sheet of paper or, if you use a computer, design a new template and answer this question. How would you assess your performance over the past month?

This will be the start of a routine; the first time will be the most difficult and the longest. Be honest, otherwise you are simply wasting precious minutes. That said, it is important to understand that there is a distinction between candour and masochism.

This is an exercise in discovering your strengths and defining your potential. A negative approach is unlikely to have a positive outcome. You should emphasise the practical and include examples and reasons. Almost by definition, this personal balance sheet will be work related whether it is in terms of sales, turnover or career progress. See the month in terms of overall goals and targets as well as specifics.

What could you have done better?

The second question to be answered is: what do you think you could have done better?

This question is tougher than you think. It is tempting to think our way is the best way. It is not so much a matter of identifying mistakes but missed opportunities. It is akin to a military commander who, having won a battle, still wants to know whether victory could have come sooner, with fewer casualties.

Even when something worked think about other ways you could have achieved the same result. This is the essence of successful leadership.

What was your biggest success over the past month?

The third area to be rated is to think through and write down what was your biggest success over the past month, and why.

This is important for several reasons. Success breeds success. Knowing where and how you have made the most impact will add to your confidence and self-esteem. This is no ego trip. True leaders are as keenly – and realistically – aware of their strengths as their limitations. Maximise the one and you automatically minimise the other.

The other dividend from an accurate appraisal of success is that it may enable you to repeat it. Some personal and business coups are one-off, the result of particular circumstances. A surprising number can be repeated or the methods used adapted to the next opportunity.

What was the biggest challenge you overcame?

The next question is closely related. What was the biggest challenge you overcame?

It has the same end: recognition, confidence building and opportunity creation. Take a broad view. It may have been a major breakthrough, for instance beating an entrenched and bigger rival to win a lucrative contract. But it may also be seemingly trivial, even homely.

For instance, your car suddenly needed major repairs and would be off the road for a week. How did you respond? Did you hire another vehicle and perhaps muddle through worrying about the impending repair bill or did you explore the potential of other means of achieving the same, or even a better, result?

In other words – and we quickly discover another of the keys to leadership success – was your response to challenge a creative one?

If you had the last month over again what one thing would you have done differently?

The final question is, in many ways, the most demanding. If you had the last month over again what one thing would you have done differently?

It is hypothetical: those minutes, days and months have gone and only the outcomes remain. It is also almost a trick question and the trick is central to your success, personal happiness and emergence as a leader. Note that I specified the **one thing** you would have done differently.

It is easy to generalise. I would have worked an extra hour a day, made more calls and so on. Here we are standing an old adage on its head. In this context it is not the devil who is in the details: it is leadership success.

Perhaps you had an idea which could lead to doing more business, creating new opportunities. You considered who would be most likely to contribute to it. You took him or her to lunch. It was a pleasant encounter and, in business terms, a complete waste of time and dollars.

Was it because there were unforeseeable obstacles in which case you should do it again. Or was it because you did not properly think it through in which case it is definitely one of the things, perhaps the one thing, you should have done differently.

Challenging yourself is not easy. It can have the advantage of privacy. You do not have to expose what may be your shortcomings, lost opportunities, tactics and strategies to others. But you do have to be honest and many of us – I know for it was true of me – find that difficult, especially at the beginning.

You may have a wife, husband or other partner to whom this process can be entrusted. At least at the outset though, candour, and therefore success is easier if this personal development programme remains in your private files. Files here are to be taken literally. If you are serious, create a filing system and a timetable and stick to it. Your questionnaire is to be completed without fail at a given time every month, preferably the last or first day when memories are still fresh.

Your records should then be stored and at another convenient time each year, say Christmas, your birthday, a holiday or an important anniversary they should be reviewed. This will give you additional insights. A different perspective, considered when there is no immediate pressure, may well also prompt you to make the significant career or business choices on which success hinges.

Leaders come in all shapes and sizes, men and women, skin colours, creeds and backgrounds. They are of infinite diversity. Obviously therefore, they are different. They have nothing in common. Wrong!

Every occupation and human activity has leaders and followers. At some point in their lives both leaders and followers had one thing in common. Ambition. The difference is the followers got distracted, admitted defeat, were content to settle for second or third best. They saw life as a constant too hard basket. Leaders got on with it.

But amid all this diversity, were there other qualities which leaders had in common?

Intrigued by this question I analysed the careers of more than a hundred. The selection was as wide as possible from historical figures such as Alexander The Great and Florence Nightingale to people unknown outside their community or sphere of business activity.

The first common characteristic I encountered was self-awareness, hence its primary place in this chapter. With it was the realisation that self-awareness is to conceit or self-centredness what gold is to tin.

One of the other hallmarks of the leader is that he or she is interested in others and thus capable of motivating them or causing them to do something that is of mutual benefit. I learned these questions from an undisputed leader who was prepared to take the time to mentor me and constantly challenge my responses.

Other unifying factors are targets and organisation. Targets have to be specific and both personal and work related. They must also be fulfilling. A progressive defined increase in sales or turnover, an ascent to the boardroom or Cabinet office within a given time or any other measurable event will suffice. Organisation in this case means processes, systems and procedures. One of my early business teachers told me there is no problem in business that cannot be solved by creating a process. Advice which has proved its worth time and again. These questions will refine your processes.

Without targets and organisation, true freedom – that ability to enjoy leisure or work for pleasure entirely by choice – is impossible. To be without a target is to drift. To be without organisation is also to drift and be doomed to disappointment.

Leaders are not accidents. Whatever genetic endowment they have, they organise their activities in such a way that others follow because it seems logical and attractive to do so. It is at its most striking in sales.

Whether you are selling a product or yourself as a candidate for some office you seek, the principle is the same.

People do not buy a product or support a person out of affection. They do so from perceived need and self-interest.

Leaders in their field have intense product awareness. They believe in it and know how other people will benefit from it. They then organise their affairs in such a way that optimum sales become seemingly inevitable. The emphasis here is on that word seemingly.

The typical and successful leader has a very clear target in mind and so is able to focus on the end result. In most cases it will be achieved only in bite size pieces or stepping-stones. There are things to be done, timetables set and reviewed, agendas drawn up for achievement over a week, a month, a year.

There is focus and framework, the very definition of organisation. But there is also flexibility, which is why I return to the theme of self-assessment and why I believe those monthly reviews are so important.

What could I have done better? The answer may dictate a change of tactics or even strategy. What will remain as a constant is the desired end result and the likelihood of achieving it.

I guarantee that you can immediately think of a dozen real life examples of the alternative. We see them every day – the deputy managing director who knows that the top job is forever beyond reach, the small business proprietor whose business is going to remain small not from choice but lack of organisation and clear goals, the veteran backbencher who knows that all he or she will see of the front bench is the back of the heads of the occupants.

None of us have any trouble identifying the failures or holders of the consolation prizes, and what a revealing phrase that is. Usually we can see with clarity why X did not make it and perhaps even the point where the possibility of success faded. The leadership difference is being able to identify the options for oneself and promptly respond to them. Of equal importance is recognising what you are not good at, and planning resources to compensate.

You may say this is easily said but hard to do. Quite so! That is why some lead and others follow.

There is an old joke that is also wise. Every week this pious man goes on his knees and prays to win the lottery so that he can provide for his

family and enjoy all the things he has missed. Every week, he prays. For years, he prays. After twenty years he prays and one day there is a flash of lightning, a great crack of thunder and a voice from on high says: “Fred, meet me halfway. Buy a ticket.”

There is such a thing as luck. But leaders have the ability and tenacity to make their own luck and to make the most of what comes their way.

Leader: organised: free. The words have different meanings but they are all related. You think of the word leader and the first images that come to mind are perhaps those of a head of state, an army commander, the head of a successful enterprise. That is so. However, using the word in that context is a tag not a description.

Think of it this way. You will often read the phrase ‘leader of fashion.’ When you think about it, leader of fashion is a nonsense, what grammarians call an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. To be in fashion is to be a member of the crowd or, at best, one of a group. Each member is following something done or worn by an innovator. The so-called leader of fashion has probably already moved on and is having a grand time doing or wearing something new, visiting somewhere new, embarked on a new activity.

Occasionally these people will be the rarest of human beings, a creative genius. Mostly, though, they will be people with a capacity to see things differently and act accordingly.

There are two versions to the story of John Montagu. In the first he was an eighteenth century English politician so hard working he needed to be able to eat at his desk. In the other he was a gambler who did not want to waste time on eating which could be used in wagering. Whichever version is true, he had meat put between two slices of bread and munched away.

John Montagu was the fourth Earl of Sandwich and thus was born the instant snack or meal consumed by the billions each year and which today is an industry in its own right and the forerunner to the even mightier fast food industry. His intentions may have been strictly practical but Lord Sandwich was a leader. Confronted by a need, he found a solution and others followed.

Self-assessment works the same way. It helps you clarify needs and seek solutions.

It may seem a nonsense to suggest that organisation and freedom are two sides of the same coin. To be organised is to be caught up in something, not

free. But learning why this is not so has been one of the most important lessons of my life and why I now find pleasure and profit in passing on the secret – and it is a secret for most people – to those willing to take it on board. You will be a leader, which I define as one of those who make things happen rather than one of those who watch things happen, only as a result of organisation.

As I looked up my small library and went to the Internet researching this article I tried to find an exception to this rule. There was none.

Looking up those references also brought home to me once again that organisation in the form of consistent processes invariably produces the quickest way to the best possible result.

A result may be obtained in a shorter time but it will not be the best possible. The best possible outcome may, though it is highly unlikely, be obtained with poor processes. But it will be at the expense of that most precious, irreplaceable commodity, time. Call it The Sandwich Factor.

Another three of the best words in our language are among the shortest; three words, only seven letters. ‘Go for it’. But they have meaning only if you know where you are headed and intend following a route and not a circle. Because of the organisation factor you will then have more freedom than just about everybody else you know.

Just 1440 minutes every day. Spend ten of them doing nothing and they are gone forever. If that is your choice, fine. If not, it is time to get that sheet of paper or click that mouse and begin your Personal Performance Appraisal. It’s time to join the other leaders.

About the Author



Michael Harrison works with people who want to grow their business and enhance their wealth. After a career in the insurance, banking and computer industries he established his boutique consultancy 21st Century Business Strategies Pty Ltd.

He can be contacted by e-mail at mharrison@strategies.com.au or by telephone at +61 (0)8 8267 6333. www.strategies.com.au