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The film Glengarry Glen Ross depicts two days in the life of four salesmen in a real estate office in North America. A 'trainer' (Blake) played by Alec Baldwin is sent by the owners to motivate them to increase sales. Blake unleashes a torrent of abuse, yells and screams profanities and assures the salesmen that, without an improvement in performance, all but two will be fired by the end of the week.

Alec Baldwin’s indelible performance aside, we can look at this scene and recognise what we know as the default setting for many leaders. Scare them. Yell. Threaten: ‘coffee is for closers’. Somehow people respond to this sort of bully tactic, even though we know it is utterly toxic and repellent. We can find thousands like this guy around the world, yet nobody would sign up to be on his team. So now that we know what not to emulate, what does another type of leader look like? The one we want to be?

Leadership is about getting things done through and with people. Try as we might, people are rarely rational-only creatures – organisations, as human systems, are messy, complicated, rich, creative and emotional. One of the biggest challenges facing leaders today is navigating this paradox of order and mess. So how then do we create and manage effective teams that get the job done? How do we become the leader we would like to work with? Here are three suggested approaches to the leadership task of working with people.

1. KNOW THYSELF
Self-awareness is the most important leadership principle. Without a meaningful understanding of who we are and what makes us tick, we cannot hope to successfully manage other people. If we have an understanding of our strengths, weaknesses, blind spots, passions, preferences, assumptions and hopes, we can then begin to manage the complexity of the leadership task.

How do you respond to change? How comfortable are you with conflict? Are you able to promote and advocate for an organisational goal even though you might have ambivalent feelings about its merits? This type of knowing cannot be learned from books alone; it requires a commitment to personal and professional development as an ongoing process. Three suggested approaches are outlined below.

Management expert Peter Drucker suggests writing down what you think will happen when you make a key decision. After nine or 12 months, review your notes and compare expectations with outcomes. An exercise like this, which is known as feedback analysis, keeps us close to our own data and decision-making processes. An important aspect of an exercise like this is building in both qualitative and quantitative expectations – in other words, the impact on people and processes as well as the bottom line.

Psychometric testing can be a useful starting point for a conversation about what makes you tick. Tests such as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) – and there are a raft of others – offer an insight at a moment in time as to how you use your perception and judgement. The Belbin Team Inventory assesses the preferred team roles of individuals and can be a helpful instrument for addressing how and why teams are effective.
(or not). It is important when considering any type of testing to work with a certified practitioner who can assist you in interpreting the results.

Consider working with an external consultant or coach. Be clear from the outset that your focus is on self-awareness as it relates to decision-making and business outcomes. This will help you choose the right consultant with whom to work. If your emphasis is on the people aspects of leadership, then you need an external consultant who is skilled in that area. There are several advantages to working with an experienced external consultant: they are not intimately involved in the day-to-day operation of your company; they hold you accountable for decisions you take, particularly as they relate to people; and you create the space to work out problematic and challenging situations.

2. YOU ARE NOT AN EXPERT

Leaders are often portrayed as all-knowing. They have the answers, see the future and intuit problems before they arise. Nobody has the right answer every time. You don’t have it all figured out so why should you pretend you do? If you behave as though you are the expert, then everyone around you will expect you to have the right answer every time. Recognising your limitations is the first step in creating a team around you.

Steve Jobs saw himself as a leader of artists. In many respects, he was a curator—he collected talented people and created the conditions in which they could create beautiful objects. Curation is as much about what is left out as what is included, and this is where Jobs excelled.

Curation involves looking at the relationships ‘between’ and asking questions such as: what is the mood, tone and quality of engagement we are striving for? What are the necessary skills and talents required in order to deliver on the task? What is the culture of this team? Is it collaborative, competitive, individual or collective? What are my skills as a leader and how can I complement them? What is my leadership style, and am I willing to be challenged? How do we negotiate the ground rules for working together?

Embracing your limitations and complementing your skills with those of your team will serve two functions. It will allow others to recognise that they have limits also, and it will strengthen the team as it comes to rely on its members in order to work effectively.

3. RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

Traditional images of leadership don’t pay a lot of attention to relating. Leaders may have difficulty relating to others, particularly when others’ views are different to their own. The leader is often portrayed as a solitary figure, distant from those whose day-to-day task is delivering on the organisation’s goals. That gap is fertile ground for mistrust, cynicism and conflict.

Leaders cannot lead without followers, so building leadership is central to effective people management. Some leaders ‘act’ as though they are interested in other people’s views and this type of defence mechanism is a cover story for a discomfort in authentic relating.

Symptoms of poor relating include: being perpetually disappointed in others’ work; blaming others for poor performance; assuming that you are always right and others are generally wrong; and feeling resentful at others’ success.

Authentic relating involves listening to others’ views and perspectives; explaining your own perspective (not simply delivering a decision); asking yourself a critical question: ‘how willing am I to change my view on the basis of others’ perspectives?’; being genuinely interested in what others think as distinct from consulting as a tick-box exercise; and viewing relationships as holding the potential for insight.

Leadership has been the focus of substantial research in the 20th and 21st centuries. As times change and gurus appear and disappear, the search for the holy grail of leadership continues. Leaders learn and develop through interaction and reflection on experience, not by sitting alone in a private office. Leadership is not a disembodied process—it is an embodied and personal act of faith in vision, people and the future. Knowing ourselves, what makes us tick and how we relate to other people are the foundations of good leadership and good team performance—hence and only if—we are brave enough to take a closer look.

Dr Anne Clancy is a Lecturer in Management at UCD College of Business.