

# Do you have the skills to be a leader?



## The Institution's Professional Development Manager, Peter Washer, considers what it means to be a leader and how leadership skills can be learned.

What makes someone a 'leader'? Is leadership a matter of nature or nurture? How does leadership differ from management? Can you learn and teach leadership?

Despite centuries of philosophical thought about the nature of leadership, and more recently academic research, the concept remains difficult to pin down. Most popular books – and there are over 100 000 books on leadership available on Amazon – relate leadership to the person or persons regarded as leaders. Typically, this literature focuses on historical leaders (e.g. Winston Churchill) or contemporary business leaders (former Apple CEO Steve Jobs is a recurring motif in this literature). These books then go on to synthesise qualities that these individuals shared to produce a definition of leadership.

Often, these simplistic definitions of leadership come down to a vague feeling that some people are born with some magic or charisma about them that others lack. Yet being in the right place at the right time is often also important. Simple 'heroic' accounts and definitions of leadership are unsatisfactory because they lack any social or historical context.

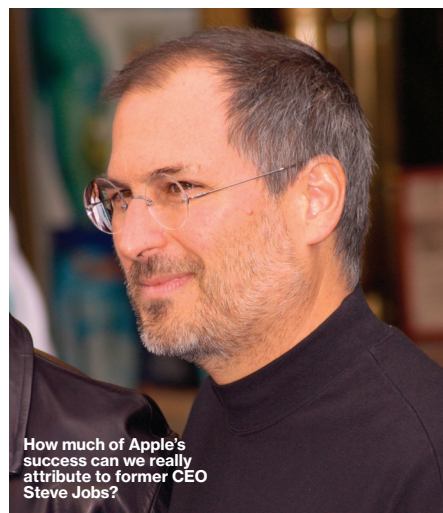
If we take the case of Churchill, he had a chequered history and reputation before World War II. For example, he sent in the army to quell the Tonypanydri riots in Wales in 1910, leading to much criticism and ill-feeling. He was also the primary architect of the military disaster at Gallipoli in 1915, where 130 000 men died. Yet in the context of World War II, he became a national leader and hero, who

inspired a nation to fight and, ultimately, win the war against Nazism. He was undoubtedly the right man in the right place and time. However, if he had died in 1939, he would not have been remembered as a great leader.

Recently, in academic literature and more generally, this *heroic person* idea of leadership has been supplanted by a more nuanced definition, which takes more account of the context in which people demonstrate leadership. For example, if a new leader is brought into an organisation, and the profits increase by 500%, then the leader might be credited with that success and be rewarded accordingly.

Some people have attributed 95% of Apple's success to Jobs. But to what extent can we attribute the collective products of a whole organisation to the individual actions of one person? Even if we can causally link the increased profits to the actions of an individual leader, what contribution do the other employees/followers have to this success?

**"LEADERSHIP IS NOT A LIST OF QUALITIES, IT IS A SET OF PRACTICES"**



How much of Apple's success can we really attribute to former CEO Steve Jobs?

### Leading by doing

If we think about it, leadership is less about individual heroes, innate charisma or magical qualities, and more about the more mundane everyday ways that a leader builds and strengthens social relationships and builds social capital. In this sense, leadership is not a list of qualities, it is a set of practices – not what you *have* but what you *do* that is important. The power of a leader rests not necessarily in their personalities or position in a hierarchy, but in their achievement of creating a network of *followers*.

If we take the 'magic' out of our definition of leadership, it poses the question: is leadership different to management, and if so, how? Rittel and Webber<sup>1</sup> have written about 'tame' and 'wicked' problems. Tame problems may be complicated but are likely to have occurred before and therefore are resolvable because there is a limited degree of uncertainty. The manager's role is to provide an appropriate process to solve the problem. Most everyday problems are tame and just require people to carry out their duties. A manager then, is someone who can make decisions to find the appropriate answer or process to solve a (tame) problem.

By contrast, a wicked problem is complex, often intractable, and no one is likely to have the prior knowledge or resources to solve it. To solve a wicked problem, the leader has to ask the appropriate kind of questions to engage their followers in a collective attempt to come to terms with and address a (wicked) problem. Wicked problems – war, financial catastrophes, even Brexit – require leaders that can frame the solutions and inspire followers to address them.

This brings us back to the idea that leadership is somehow related to social skills such as emotional intelligence, empathy, active listening, inspirational public speaking and so on. Looked at in this way, leadership becomes less a magical quality, and more something that it is possible both to teach and to learn.

### Learning to lead

This poses the question of how one might learn to be a leader. A leader might have

a vision or strategy for where they want their organisation and their followers to go. But to achieve that vision, they need to be able to learn from their followers, even if the feedback maybe difficult to hear. The question is less, 'How do I lead this organisation?' but more, 'What type of organisation do we want to build?' and 'Who can I identify to help me build it?'

For engineers, to step up from what you are trained to do – engineering – to assume a position of leadership is sometimes difficult. People choose a career in engineering because the daily work of an engineer is what they enjoy. It takes a different set of skills to be self-aware and to identify your own leadership style; to delegate and influence other people; to recruit, motivate and retain valuable team members; and to inspire them to follow your vision. There is no magic to this skillset, and though it might come more easily to some people than to others, these skills are not something that anyone is born with. The skillset of a successful leader can be taught.

### Leadership Development Programme

This thinking forms the basis of the Institution's new Leadership Development Programme. While larger firms frequently can offer leadership development training to their engineers, most small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) cannot. This new programme, developed in collaboration with the University of Bath's School of Management, aims to address that gap. It is aimed at early- to mid-career engineers working in SMEs.

There are four core teaching days delivered by academics from the University of Bath's School of Management. In addition, participants are able to choose a further three courses from the Institution's existing range of professional guidance courses, so that they can tailor the programme to their own professional development needs, and to the needs of the SMEs they work in. The programme starts in March 2019 and will run for a year; places are limited to 20.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information about the programme, visit [www.istructe.org/leadership](http://www.istructe.org/leadership) or contact Peter Washer, Professional Development Manager:  
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#### REFERENCE

▶ 1) Rittel H.W.J. and Webber M.M. (1973) 'Dilemmas in a general theory of planning', *Policy Sciences*, 4, pp. 155–169

#### FURTHER READING

This article is indebted to the following book, which makes an excellent introduction to the subject of leadership:

▶ Grint K. (2010) *Leadership: A Very Short Introduction*, New York: Oxford University Press

If you are aged 28 years or under, you may enter the Kenneth Severn Award 2019. To enter, answer the following question, set by 2019 Institution President, Joe Kindregan:

Question:

**What additional skills do structural engineers need to develop to answer future humanitarian challenges?**

Answers should be in the form of a written paper (max. 1500 words) and may include relevant imagery that supplements the text.

The judges will be looking for originality, value to the structural engineering profession and clarity of presentation.

Entrants must be 28 years of age or under on 1 January 2019. Engineers who are not members of the Institution are also welcome to enter.

For full details and to submit your entry, visit:  
[www.istructe.org/kenneth-severn-award](http://www.istructe.org/kenneth-severn-award)

The winner will receive:

- ▶ The prestigious Kenneth Severn Diploma
- ▶ A cash prize of £500

The winning paper will also be considered for publication in *The Structural Engineer*.



**The closing date for entries is 31 January 2019**