

Pole position

Leadership requires a soft hand on the tiller and a sense of boldness, argues Elaine Ford.



Leadership in business is not simply about managing and motivating people to get results – it's about handling the change that competitive markets bring about – but it needs a light hand on the tiller to keep everyone on course. The importance of well-honed soft skills is often overlooked, but they are a great foundation for improving leadership capabilities and, consequently, can help to drive better results.

Vision is of primary importance to good leadership; you can't blow an uncertain trumpet. You must have a compelling vision that others will buy into and that fits with your company's business plan and strategy. So

focus all your energy and passion on achieving your goal, infect people with your enthusiasm and use the energy it generates to pursue your ideas.

Central to this is having a target to aim for, so decide on what you want to achieve and go for it – even in the face of obstacles and setbacks. None of us like to admit it but, if we are honest with ourselves, past failures can often be traced back to a lack of real conviction and determination. And, when the odds seem stacked against you, it takes a bit of backbone to make that difficult call or deal with the physician that has no time for you. Be bold – nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Planning is also a critical aspect of leadership. Always remember that if you fail to prepare then prepare to fail. Successful leaders plan their work carefully and then stick to their plans. And, once you have a plan in place, make sure you tell people exactly what is expected of them, as agreeing expectations and setting goals is vital to the success

is clear – and it should be if you have been straight along the way – then deal with the situation quickly and cleanly. Be ruthless but fair as any delay will only hurt you, the project and the rest of the team.

An important part of leadership is dishing out the perks and rewards fairly. This can be conference attendance, training, travel, etc, but the most

'The best industry physicians are those who work well with others and with whom other people want to work. And the best leaders are those who make promises that they keep.'

of project teams. Matrix structures are common in the pharmaceutical industry and, as the front-liner when it comes to medical advice, it may fall to you to lead certain processes forward. Ensure people are clear about where they are going and what they are doing.

You reap what you sow

Work harder than everyone else. This doesn't mean working your fingers to the bone but, if it's your baby, you should be seen to be doing the lion's share of the work. Commitment from the top tends to inspire the same from the rest of a team. It may not be about putting in hugely long hours, but rather about working smartly to get things done, and get them done well.

A major factor in this is accuracy – it's all in the detail. Well, not entirely, but ever worked really hard to close a deal, only to have it fall apart because of some minor detail that sent it pear-shaped? A small detail to you can be a deal-breaker to your customer, so leave nothing to chance. Check, check and check again.

Back to the team, and it is essential to keep people motivated. This is largely about treating them decently as human beings, mobilising the soft skills to treat them as you would like to be treated. Understand what works for them as an individual – we're all different – so for one person it may be a 'thank you', while for others it may be continual pushing.

Within the world of pharmaceuticals, events often change faster than people. However much you have coached someone, nurtured your relationship with them or communicated with them, there may come a time when you must part company. If your conscience

important part about a reward is the recognition. A public thank you is worth more in motivational terms than a private cheque. Similarly, not thanking someone for their contribution can do more damage than active criticism. Sharing credit is the fastest way to build credit.

There's no point having a dog and barking yourself

A mistake leaders often make is to get involved in everything being done by others in the team. There's no point in having a dog and barking yourself, people are part of a team for the skills that they can offer and results that they can achieve. Keep control by listening to them regularly, communication is key.

Also, get into the habit of regular informal communication with your own manager. It keeps them abreast of the current situation and gives them first hand information to pass on to their boss when questioned on the sales figures. And it identifies potential problems before they escalate, as well as covering your back when you say: "I told you about that last week."

The communications baton also applies when asking for advice and sharing your thoughts. People love to dish out wisdom, so go and ask something specific and then listen hard. This makes them feel they have helped. You'll understand how they are thinking – and you might learn something!

Being a senior manager can be a lonely life. Most people in this category do feel a real sense of responsibility for the people who work for them, so treating your boss like a fellow human being, a colleague or even a friend makes their life and yours



a good deal easier. But remember, familiarity breeds contempt, and you can't expect to be bosom buddies. If anyone is ever going to criticise or sack you, it'll be your boss.

In business, changes happen and the pharmaceutical industry is no exception. Issues arise and challenges rear their ugly heads. Instead of running off to your manager and saying: "I thought you ought to know there's a problem," consider solving the problem yourself, or at least brainstorm some possible solutions. Most bosses dream of finding a solution in their in-tray rather than a stack of problems.

It's not just charisma

I know that many who are successful in business are highly charismatic. But is charisma an essential quality for a leader? I don't believe so. Inspiring others by creating the environment and circumstances in which they can flower seems a more 21st century approach and better suited to the flatter structures we see now throughout the pharmaceutical industry.

It's important to realise that you cannot go it alone.

You need the collaboration and support of others inside and outside your company to make things happen. The best industry physicians are those who work well with others and with whom other people want to work. And the best leaders are those who make promises that they keep.

In the same vein, it's crucial to get out there – great leaders are constantly talking to customers and colleagues, reinforcing the company's business objectives, helping others to understand new products and initiatives, checking on customer confidence and looking for new opportunities. OK, it's imperative you keep up the paperwork, but effective leadership and effective selling are contact sports.

No matter how much customer support you have from your company, you're the person in the front line. Try to pass the buck to someone else and I guarantee you'll lose respect and credibility. You're in a high-risk position and, if you want the rewards, then you'll probably have to take some flak along the way. Take responsibility for problems and do whatever needs to be done to put things right. Your customers and your team need to know that you are their advocate.