

CHAPTER 1

# THE LEADERSHIP RIDDLE

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**LEADERSHIP**

IS A  
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If you read enough leadership books you will realise that to succeed you need to become an improbable mix of Nelson Mandela, Lord Nelson, Machiavelli, Churchill, Genghis Khan and Mother Teresa all put together. Some bosses think they are already that good: they are normally bosses who are well worth avoiding.

As an experiment, see what happens when you swap Genghis Khan for Mother Teresa. So let Genghis Khan sort out the slums of Calcutta in his own unique way. He would succeed: there would be no slums left. Now imagine Mother Teresa on horseback leading the Mongols on their rampage across Asia. For most people, this does not work.

So it is clear, we cannot succeed by being someone else. We are who we are, and we are not suddenly going to become Churchill or Mandela.

But equally, we cannot succeed by just being ourselves. If we hang around like a teenager in full hormonal angst waiting for the world to recognise our innate genius, humanity and natural leadership talent, we will wait for a very long time.

So we cannot succeed by being someone else and we cannot succeed by just being ourselves. We are doomed.

Or perhaps not. There is one way out of the riddle: be the best of who you are.

“Be the best of who you are” sounds trite, but is not. First, it means focusing on your own unique strengths. Think of various bosses you have had. You may wonder how some of them ever became a boss with their glaring weaknesses. But even my worst bosses had one or two signature strengths which propelled them to the top. Successful leaders are like any successful performer: they build on strength, not on weakness.

Bizarrely, most evaluation and development systems focus on weaknesses or “development opportunities” in the jargon. Olympic athletes do not succeed by focusing on weakness: making weightlifters focus on their synchronised swimming skills would be entertaining, but not effective.

If you want to succeed, work out what you are really good at. Then make sure you find roles where you can play to your strengths. Avoid assignments that focus on your “development opportunities” unless you want to set your career back by years. The way to deal with weaknesses is not to focus on them, but to work around them. Leadership is a

team sport, so make sure you have a team that complements your talents: if you are not great at book keeping, or strategy, or customer service, or financial analysis, you can find plenty of people who are.

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