

## Interview – Ben Simonton

**Alistair Schofield speaks to Ben Simonton, author of "Leading People to be Highly Motivated and Committed"**

### **What made you want to write a book about leadership?**

"Having spent more than 30 years managing people in a wide variety of situations, I realised that most of what I had learned about real leadership had been self-taught."

"Having put the people who worked for me through the mill during that time while I learned 'on the job' and made virtually every mistake known to man, I felt that I owed it to them to write down what I had learned to try to help others avoid making the same mistakes."

### **Did you not receive training in leadership when you joined the Navy?**

"I did but most of what we were taught at the Naval Academy about leadership was based on apocryphal stories of great military leaders like John Paul Jones. While these stories were unquestionably interesting and inspiring, they all concentrated on the results that those individuals achieved and did little to explain what the leadership skills were that enabled them to achieve those results."

"It's ironic really as most of what we were taught at the Naval Academy was very factual and extremely specific, such as how a ship's propulsion system works, seamanship and navigation, the rules of engagement and so on. Yet where leadership was concerned, it was all couched in vague and non-specific terms."

### **When did you first come to realise that your knowledge was lacking?**

"I guess it gradually dawned on me over a 12 year period. During that time I served on 5 different ships gradually rising through the ranks and taking on greater man-management responsibilities."

"During this time, I knew that I was supposed to be a leader and that I had to manage my assigned group.

and came across two bits of wisdom."

"One of the books I read was a series of case studies by Harvard professors on organisational behavior. One of the case studies portrayed a short, somewhat ugly, stooped over and poorly dressed manager who was continually coughing up phlegm. He was a terrible manager who exemplified how bad one can be in managing a group of people. He was also greatly disliked by his people."

"This same man was the focus of another study done some years later, but this time he exemplified how an exceptionally good manager, president of a large company, can achieve truly superior results with his people. He looked, dressed and coughed the same as he had in the previous study, but was adored by his people. When asked what he did to make such a change, he related how mad he had been at reading the first study of himself and how after calming down he had realised it was true. After that, he embarked on a journey to learn all that he could about managing and leading people. The Bottom Line? Anyone can change from being the worst to the best, if they want to do so badly enough."

"The second bit of wisdom I learned came from one of the conclusions voiced in the same book. The conclusion was a sort of Copernican theory that workers do not rotate around the boss (the sun). No, the boss actually rotates around the workers and without the warming heat of the workers, the boss dies."

### **What was it about these two pieces of wisdom that struck you as being profound?**

"The first point was that leadership was obviously something that was learnable and, if it was learnable, it must be definable."

"The second was my sudden realisation that, no matter how good a man manager I was, my ship could never be any better than the sum of all the actions taken by each and every sailor."

"In thinking back over my previous 12 years, I realised that I had spent very little time listening. I had been much

But at the time I did not see the connection between the two. I saw management as a process of delegation and issuing commands while leadership was some sort of aura that people credited you with based on your results."

"Without this knowledge, I read a lot about leadership in the civilian world, but it remained an undefined art form. No matter where I searched, leadership did not have the backing of the reliable theory and specific 'how tos' which were so much a part of the other aspects of my professional life such as navigation, naval gunnery or mechanical and electrical engineering."

"With regard to managing people, I was unsure about lots of things. In particular, I was particularly concerned with not being able to improve the performance of my mediocre and worse sailors. I was a great believer in force, the use of power to gain performance. What other tool did I have?"

"As a result I believe I developed a reputation as a well respected, but somewhat brutal officer to serve under."

"The eureka moment for me came when, after 12 years at sea, I was assigned to the Naval Postgraduate School to pursue a Masters degree. I decided to make use of the library in an attempt to learn what I should do to improve as a manager of people

too busy figuring out what my next order would be to find out what the troops thought about things.”

### **What impact did this knowledge have on your performance and that of your team?**

“I started to listen and I started to learn.”

“By listening more I found that leadership actually became easier as the troops mostly had good ideas and suggestions that helped me. Instead of having to be a font of all knowledge (which no one ever can be), I was able to involve others in the decision-making process.”

“I also found that they had issues, suggestions and complaints which it was my job to listen to and to help resolve.”

“Surprisingly, not only did morale and spirits improve but so did performance. The more I listened, the more their performance improved.”

### **Where did the idea for the book come from?**

“Having realised that leadership was actually a definable skill, I set about analysing my actions and those of people around me to determine how it worked.”

“Having broken it down for my own benefit, writing it down for the benefit of others was a logical next step.”

### **So what is your model for leadership?**

“Well you need to buy the book to find that out, but I will try to provide you with a brief insight.”

“Through listening and observing I concluded that, metaphorically, ‘Leadership’ and ‘Following’ are like the opposite sides of a coin called ‘Core Values’ and that everything that takes place in the workplace sends one or more core value message to employees. From these leadership messages most employees derive a set of value standards (some good and some bad) and they use these values, rather than their own, to perform their work.”

“I say ‘most employees’ as some steadfastly refuse to adopt other people’s values, relying instead on

their own. I called these people ‘Non-followers’.”

“I came to realise that the performance of those who were not followers, performance that had always been high, did not change much. Non-followers also use 100% of their brainpower on their work while followers use most of theirs in trying to conform and in detecting what they must conform to. This means that non-followers unleash their full potential of creativity, innovation, productivity, motivation and commitment (all of which come from the brain) while followers are too busy conforming to unleash theirs.”

“Unfortunately, at the time I made this discovery I was too busy leading followers toward higher standards to realise the significance of this observation.”

“At this point, I moved jobs and was replaced by a manager who cared much more about who he had to know to be promoted than about providing good leadership to his people. As the Core Values he displayed were not particularly good, the performance of the team dropped and within a year the performance of the followers had fallen back to their original low level.”

“It came as a devastating blow to me to realise that the high standards of performance I had created had not lasted and was in fact little more than a house of cards.”

“And that’s when the light went on in my head! I had been concentrating all my efforts on the Followers whereas what I should have been doing was to make everyone a non-follower so that they would not waste their brainpower on conforming and wouldn’t ever follow bad leadership back down again.”

“After a lot of effort spent learning about non-followers, I created and proved a set of leadership skills and techniques, complete with supporting leadership theory, by which to lead followers to become strong and independent non-followers.”

“This is what I now consider to be “true empowerment”, the freeing of followers from the bondage of following, and it is this that forms the basis of the book.”

### **Have these theories been put into practice anywhere apart from the Navy?**

“Yes. When I left the Navy I joined New York City’s electric utility company. I had more than 1,000 staff and, I must admit that I was as surprised as anyone when the use of these leadership skills resulted in over 300% per person productivity gain! In my opinion, at least 40% of this gain and possibly as much as 60% was due to turning followers into non-followers.”

“Moreover, these leadership skills were the core of the leadership training I provided to my junior bosses, people of varying backgrounds, personalities and beliefs. These bosses proved over time that average people can learn and successfully use these leadership skills with relative ease, regardless of personality. In the process of becoming exceptional managers of people, their leadership and management styles became non-issues.”

“Leaders have too often been placed on high pedestals while the art of leadership has too often appeared to be beyond the comprehension of ordinary people. This is a delusion at best, a means to keep us all in awe at worst. Leadership skill as well as leadership theory is easy to understand, straightforward and inherently natural. The tools which make leadership easy to learn and easy to implement are what I present in my book.”

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Ben Simonton’s book ‘Leading People to be Highly Motivated and Committed’ (ISBN 0976674807) is available from Amazon priced £8.50.

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