

# BORN OR MADE?

**What makes an engineer a good leader? And can training make a difference? Ben Hargreaves investigates**



**M**ost among us, at some point, will have worked for bad managers. If you've ever worked under a crassly despotic figurehead with the social niceties of a slug, communication skills of a lamppost, and morals of a bacterium, you'll not, sadly, be alone.

Good managers may be thin on the ground, and inspiring leaders even rarer. But engineers may well find themselves thrust into leadership roles without the back-up that will see them succeed, says Simon Mitchell, director of management consultancy Development Dimensions International. "Often you find people are promoted into leadership positions without the skills and understanding of what it takes to be a good leader – and that sets people up for failure," says Mitchell.

Engineers, for example, may be expert product designers or great at managing risk. They carve out a reputation for excellence that sees them rise up the corporate food chain. Their talents see them given management positions – but their expertise isn't what is required to lead effectively. Mitchell adds: "Very few engineers go into engineering because they want to be leaders. They would probably choose another profession if so.

"But sometimes what happens in an organisation is that they gain a reputation for excellence in their chosen field that sees them promoted into a leadership position, but being design engineers, say, they don't necessarily know how to lead."

Whether leadership skills can be taught is open to debate. Sam Cockerill, an independent consultant and graduate of the Sainsbury Management Fellows scheme, which funds high-flying engineers to take MBA courses, believes that good leaders become so essentially through experience. Rather than being taught didactically how to lead, they instead learn experientially. Cockerill says: "Becoming a good leader is as much about reflecting on the situations and approaches that you've experienced in the past, and deriving from those clarity in your own mind about the vision and the direction that you believe is appropriate for your organisation and the people that you are leading.

"Then you must be able to communicate that vision and the ideas behind it in a way that inspires people and brings them along in the direction of travel." Paradoxically, then, Cockerill notes, "I don't believe leadership skills can be taught – but they can be learnt".

Mitchell says: "I'm often asked whether good leaders are born or made – the answer is both. But »



Now hear this: 'Some leaders are very charismatic and have the ability to pull people with them'

## 444 SOME FIND THE TRANSITION TO LEADERSHIP VERY DIFFICULT, EVEN IF THEY HAVE BEEN PROMOTED MANY TIMES

of weakness. We call these areas of weakness 'derailers' – elements of the way they behave that have the potential to derail them or their team."

One weakness engineers have, believes Cockerill, is to focus too intently on the challenge at hand without looking at the wider context. "What engineers can be less good at doing is widening out their peripheral vision to encompass not just the problem itself but also the environment, people and resources that could be brought to bear on it to either redefine the problem or work through it. That's something that studying for an MBA can help with," says Cockerill.

Perhaps the most important point is for new leaders to get some assistance, Mitchell believes, whether in the form of a mentor or leadership-specific training. Engineers may struggle, for example, to delegate to and motivate others, having been responsible for their own work. "Some of the most difficult things to navigate through are developing the skills and mindset to be able to get work done through other people and not oneself," he says.

"You often hear people say they find it difficult leaving peers on a Friday and coming back in as the boss on a Monday. Then you need to develop a new network of peers because increasingly it's your influence within the organisation that is going to get the job done. Not your authority.

"Some people find the transition to leadership very difficult, even if they have been promoted many times."

Wyles of Festo says: "Can engineers be trained as leaders? My feeling and experience is that it is attitude that is the key. If a person wants to be seen as a leader or wants to become a coach, and recognises that their success depends on their people and not themselves – if they have that attitude then they can definitely be trained even if their communication skills are limited or if management is new to them.

"But if their attitude is that people are there to do as they are told and they can do a better job themselves, if that's their starting position, then I think management skills can be trained but leadership and coaching can't."

it's wrong to think that any leader is born with all the skills they need to be a leader – and it's wrong to think that leaders can't develop skills they haven't got."

Gary Wyles is managing director of Festo in the UK and also runs the company's training and development division. This wing of the company develops engineers' sales and communication skills as well as general management abilities for both Festo's staff and engineers among its customers. The training side of the business developed to encompass courses on technology, sales, services and also leadership. "Do engineers make good leaders? That's the million-dollar question," Wyles says. "If we talk about selling skills or maybe just general communication skills with customers, I think engineers are often coming from a position of disadvantage.

"What I mean is that engineers are really trained to identify and understand all of the potential things that could go wrong. Because they have to manage and plan for problems, they can be a little bit negative in their approach to communication." Another example of where engineers might struggle is that, having seen a customer's problem many times in the past, they fail to explain fully where things have gone wrong to the client. Wyles says: "The untrained engineer who goes into sales had a tendency not to properly explore the needs of the customer, making the assumption that, because they've seen the problem before, the solution is going to be the same."

Wyles says effective managers who are also engineers have three core attributes: specialist knowledge, communication skills and attitude. "The engineer has to want to provide a good service to the customer," he says. "We refer to it as the head, the heart and the hand: the hand is the ability to do the job, the head is the ability to communicate effectively, and the heart is the right attitude. The wrong attitude is completely evident to the customer."

Not all leaders are the same, however. Mitchell identifies various personality types that make good leaders, including introvert as well as extrovert characters, and various styles of leadership that are appropriate to different scenarios. He says: "Some leaders are very charismatic and have the ability to pull people with them, take risks and be innovative, and that's fantastic if you're looking to break into new markets with new products – but you don't necessarily want people of that mould in charge, say, of an oil rig.

"We often think of leaders as being charismatic, or having big personalities, and often good leaders are charismatic – but not always. There are very good leaders who are more introvert."

He says leadership is a complex and constantly evolving field. Part of the key is for leaders to understand their weaknesses, says Mitchell. "A big part of leadership is for the leader to understand where they are strong and where they are not so strong. They need to be able to capitalise on the strengths and manage those areas