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No Bullsh*t Leadership

Why the World
Needs More
Everyday
Leaders
and Why That
Leader Is You

Chris Hirst

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FOREWORD

Sir Clive Woodward

NOBODY IS A BORN leader. However, it is something you can learn and develop in yourself, and coach and teach in others. Many assume leadership ability to be determined by personality traits such as self-confidence, charisma and certainty of vision, but in my experience, the two most important skills effective leaders possess are things we can all do – if we choose to. The first is to be really good at listening, and the second is to remain permanently curious, open and willing to learn. The days of a remote leader that only very senior people get to speak to are over; everyone today expects to have a voice and be heard. More than ever before, today's successful leaders must be able to listen effectively and learn quickly.

Great leaders recognise that the best ideas won't only come from them. It's not a matter of 'ceding authority', you're still going to have to take responsibility, say yes or no, but great ideas can and will come from everywhere – if you let them. I have never thought that I was particularly good at ideas, but I am good at creating teams that are able to think for themselves. And I'm very good at listening and acting on what they tell me.

I have also always loved to learn. Not just from my

own experience, but from others – whoever or wherever they may be. I will travel anywhere in the world for the opportunity to understand or uncover something that may make me a better leader and coach. Once you view learning as part of your job, you'll be amazed at the breadth and variety of people who can teach you something new. I call this 'relentless learning'. When I was head coach of the England Rugby Team on our journey towards the 2003 World Cup we experienced our share of famous victories and unwelcome defeats – as all teams do. However, instead of simply celebrating our victories and spending many hours mulling over our defeats, we did the opposite. We brushed off defeats as an inevitable (if unwelcome) part of the job; when they came along we had a beer or two (you still could in those days) and put them behind us. However, when we won, we were determined to learn from it; we were in early the next morning deconstructing what it was we had done right and made sure we were even better next time.

If you are a good listener and a quick learner, then you are well on your way. With these two ingredients, leadership may turn out to be much less complicated than you thought.

I first worked with Chris nearly ten years ago when he was the newly appointed CEO of a business striving to shake off a terrible reputation and with recent performance to match. He approached me because he rightly believed we shared a restless desire to learn, a passion for trying new ways of solving familiar problems and a healthy disrespect for bureaucracy, pomposity and

received wisdom. That is how I've found him ever since. He is as the title of this book suggests.

Chris is one of the most unconventional and successful leaders that I know and this book is about how he works. He's a great listener and you see here why people enjoy working with and for him. He is, as I like to put it, a sponge rather than a rock. Like all successful leaders, he is tough and driven, but never lets you forget that ultimately leadership is about people and what comes through on these pages is the warmth and humanity with which he approaches his role.

Every page of this book is bursting with thoughtful, yet practical advice, all tried, tested and proven. It is no ego-driven list of achievements, but an honest account of the difficulties, failures and tough choices that are necessarily part of being a leader. And how through clarity of thought, working to develop your own leadership skills, and focusing on action, you too can overcome and succeed.

Leading is about relentless learning and I unhesitatingly recommend this book to anybody who wishes to improve their skills, effectiveness and successes as a leader. No matter who you are, what kind of organisation or size of team you run, there's something here for you. So good luck – and trust me, after a couple of hours with this book, you may find it's not as difficult as you think.

INTRODUCTION

I HESITATE TO WASTE my time and yours on yet another book about leadership. Yet never has the subject been more important. We look around our world and see millions of people yearning for leaders who can help them fulfil their potential. We need better leaders everywhere, in politics, science and business, in our schools, hospitals and prisons. Where are the great, if often flawed, leaders of the past? We live in a time where people (and particularly, but by no means exclusively, the young) demand leadership by consent, yet paradoxically we see, in our public life at least, the return of the demagogue.

Leadership has become a word devalued by overpromise and underdelivery, by the waffle of business schools and business books, by the perceived failings of politicians and businessmen (and women). This bullshit that surrounds the subject both inhibits people from fulfilling their potential and excludes people from believing they too could lead. Leadership is a word drowning in words, crying out for rescue.

We need not a new word but a new understanding, one that illuminates rather than obscures, includes rather than excludes. We have always previously believed that

leaders are the people right at the very top of our public life: politicians and CEOs; generals and dot-com billionaires. This is who business schools and business books speak of and to when you open their covers. However, important though these people may be, they are the 0.0001 per cent; few of us will ever even meet them, never mind actually join their club.

The reality however, is that today, millions of us are leaders: whether you run a hospital ward, a weekend football team, a high school department or a thirty-person start-up. Most of us will never have a Harvard Business School case study written about us; but anybody who has people who depend on them is a leader.

Our complicated and interwoven societies are full of everyday leaders just like this, and it will enrich all our lives if greater numbers amongst us not only recognise the leadership opportunity we have, but also feel more confident and able to grasp it. And in doing so, thrive. Not everybody is a leader and not everybody wants to be, but many thousands are and each is striving to fulfil their own lifelong ambitions, worrying at night about how they're doing and agonising about the successes and failures of those who rely on them. These are the leaders who make our societies tick and outnumber millions-to-one the subjects of business school case studies.

Not only are leaders all around us, but the hierarchical world we grew up in is disappearing. Old-fashioned, top-down management is becoming less effective and less relevant across our societies, in our companies and even in how our countries themselves are run. It doesn't

work because it is too slow, too unresponsive and too one dimensional; it doesn't work because it restricts rather than liberates the power of the whole team; and it doesn't work for the simple reason that people won't put up with it. Today, as never before, people expect to have a voice, have a say and be listened to. Leaders at all levels must build cultures that encourage people to speak up and out, and respond effectively and inclusively when they do. We can only achieve our collective potential by unlocking the potential of the hundreds of thousands of leaders in our midst.

All of our futures rely on more, better leaders, leaders who already exist in all walks of life: everyday leaders. This book is for these people.

I have been a leader for the majority of my career, although for many years I, like most people, didn't think of myself in that way or even recognise that as my role. At first I ran small teams of two to three, and today I run a business that spans the globe with over 8,000 people and more than eighty offices. It was only around ten years ago, however, when I first became a CEO, that I began to think seriously about what leadership is and how it can be done well – or badly.

I had become head of a drab and failing advertising agency – one that had stubbornly resisted change despite the efforts of successive management teams, some of which I had been a member. Through the years of failure I had seen that good intentions, hard work and smart people, though essential, were not enough. Now I had my chance, but would it prove a poisoned chalice; was

the business unfixable? Nothing was certain about the journey ahead other than I was determined to both learn from, and never repeat, the many mistakes we had made to that point, and in doing so I began to consciously learn to lead.

This book, then, isn't a theoretical discourse – consider it more a manual, built on the back of meetings, conversations, weeks and even years where I fucked up, avoided difficult choices and trusted in the wrong people. My hope isn't that you don't fail: periods of failure are inevitable, and acceptance of this is a liberating state. Rather, my hope is that by cutting through the bullshit that surrounds leadership and being able to focus yourself and your team on what matters most, your victories will rapidly exceed your defeats.

So how does this book work? First, I'll tell you what I think a leader is, and you can decide if you are one or want to be one. If so, we'll begin. We'll explore a new and very simple definition of leadership: that it is simply the getting from one place to another. The first task of a leader then is to agree and decide where you are leading people to. I'll show you how to get them there, and how making better, faster decisions and re-framing your fear of failure are essential to this. A leader must be followed. We'll look at how you build the team you need around you, and the culture that binds you together. Of course, you can do all this perfectly and still not reach your intended goal. We'll look at the importance of maintaining the energy of your team throughout the journey, and how this is impossible if you are not effectively managing yourself. Finally, we

look at the hardest situation of all: how to turn around a team that is broken and failing. I'll show you that the rules then remain as simple as before, but putting them into practice gets harder still.

*No Bullsh*t Leadership* does what it says on the cover. It clarifies and simplifies, stripping leadership down to its most basic components, leaving the reader with a framework on which to construct their own leadership philosophy and style. It is as long as it needs to be and no longer; treat this book with disrespect, scribble on it, fold over the corners, tear out the pages; steal from it, improve on it, wildly disagree with it, lend it out and snatch it back. Use it.

Most of all, this is about how to get stuff done, and if you're like me you have no time, short attention and want it straight, no bullshit.

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ARE YOU A LEADER?

A short pep talk to the waverers

*If your actions create a legacy that inspires others
to dream more, learn more, do more and become more,
then you are an excellent leader.*

Dolly Parton

I'M PRESUMING THAT IF you've got this far you're either standing around in the airport bookshop, filling time because your flight is delayed, or you've taken the plunge and decided to give this book a go. In either case – thank you.

Before we proceed, however, a health warning. If you're looking for long words, nuance and complexity you've come to the wrong place. You'll get none of that here. Quickly close the book before the spine is broken and take it back.

In both cases you have made a conscious decision to pick up a book on leadership. Therefore you have at least a passing interest in what leadership is, and a desire to improve your leadership skills. Perhaps some of you are

asking yourselves if you are a leader at all. I hope that's the case, because you're exactly the people we need: anybody who has neither self-doubt nor desire for self-improvement is both unlikely to be reading, and, in my experience, unlikely to succeed.

You'll work out, as you skip through the following pages, that I have little to add to the vast store of research on trying to define a 'leadership type'. Not only do I consider this to be a waste of time, but worse, it can perpetuate the exclusion of certain types of people and groups from leadership positions.

It sadly remains the case that some parts of our societies, for a whole load of well-documented reasons, find it easier to get into leadership roles than others. It is an incredibly important issue and one whose depth and complexity goes way beyond the scope of this book, but its resolution is of the highest moral and economic importance. These societal factors, that of course we need better leaders to help us fix, must not be confused or obscured by erroneous attempts to make leadership the preserve of certain personality types.

I can't change society with this book, but I can create better, more successful leaders, because 'leadership' is a muscle that can be trained and developed. The good news is that in my practical experience there isn't a 'leadership type'. What this means is, it could be you – indeed, it may already be you. You just have to recognise it and grasp it. So here goes.

A leader has both authority and responsibility. The inverse makes the point even more forcefully: without

both authority and responsibility one cannot be considered a leader, irrespective of title or position.

No one is born a leader, and the process towards leadership is uneven. For many people it is a long journey, and for some it is unasked for. Sometimes a leader finds herself the unwilling recipient of responsibility and must decide whether she wants to take it. Our cultural histories abound with stories of the unwilling leader forced through chance and adversity into the role.

More often, in our real, day-to-day world, the nascent leader has the choice: to take up their authority, or not. At different times all leaders will find themselves at this point. Typically, it is when we find ourselves in a new role – for example, when we raise our hand at a community meeting, agree to coach a kids' football team or when we get promoted. It can be a moment of mixed emotions: celebration, exhilaration, trepidation or perhaps even anxiety. Whatever your feelings, it brings with it new and often significant challenges.

At some point, promotion means the unavoidability of leadership. For even the most confident people, these are moments of great personal challenge and self-doubt, even if we choose not to admit it. The successful leader would be wise not to wait until this moment to consider what that means in practice, and how she will respond. Leading is not just a slightly bigger job; it is a completely different job. Here is where the thoughtful and serious leader should begin to consciously learn their craft.

A leader at whatever level must be prepared to take up their responsibility. To some it comes naturally and

without thinking, to others it doesn't. This makes one no better or more 'natural' than the other; they are just different. In fact, I could convince myself that those who choose to think about and consider their leadership style are the kind of leaders we need more of today. This book is designed to help with the practical process of learning and everyday leading.

We can all be leaders. Maybe not everybody wants to be one, but that's different from not being able to do so. A former boss of mine, Richard Hytner, wrote a great book called *Consiglieri* about the enduring power of the No. 2. I would argue, however, that this is simply leadership under another name and in a different guise. No matter your position in an organisation, if you have people you're looking out for, then you're a leader too.

We can all lead if we choose to. What follows, in my opinion, is how.