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The politics of good leadership



Leadership has been much in the news recently. Poor Gordon Brown certainly lacks it, as apparently do all our political figures at the moment.

The whole ruling elite is paralysed by the pervasive, creeping expenses scandal. Even Messrs Cameron and Clegg fear that a strong leadership line could easily backfire as they, or their loyal lieutenants, may be later accused of having sinned themselves.

Back in the retail world, strong leadership is much more evident. You don't see the likes of Messrs King, Bolland, Green, Templeman and Rose panicked into inaction and silence by the recession or dodgy expense claims. Yet, on the other hand, today's retail leaders are not the dictators of earlier generations either; no more John Sainsbury, Sir Rick Greenbury or Sir Ken Morrison.

Years ago, when I worked at Mars, the company decided to carry out some analysis on what made a successful senior executive, interviewing company managers and identifying what the common attributes were of senior Mars executives. When I was asked, I felt a bit lost for words. I couldn't really see any common attributes at all in the senior executives.

In the end, that study came to a similar conclusion. The error was, of course, in looking for common attributes of a senior organisational level, rather for those attributes that made good leaders. In most organisations,



Justin King's success at Sainsbury's can in part be put down to the strong team he has in place

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these are somewhat different things.

Perhaps the greatest leadership skill of all is knowing your own limitations and recruiting people under you who are at least as good as you, particularly in areas where you are weaker or less experienced.

This seems very much to be at the heart of Justin King and Marc Bolland's revivals of Sainsbury's and Morrisons. And the talent school of Asda attested to Archie Norman's and Allan Leighton's approach to this at the grocer. They themselves were of course also a yin and yang partnership of very different approaches and skills.

Actually, my Mars boss at the time understood this strategy very well. He said that because he knew he wasn't the greatest manager around, he compensated for this by recruiting only people who were better than him. Needless to say, he flourished on this pragmatism and retired early, a happy man, to spend his pension on a second, political career.

So attracting and retaining talent ought to be key for a good leader. Too often the spotlight is on the leader himself and not enough on those around them. A poor leader will, on the other hand, try to attract attention, not talent. After all, if your second in command is too good, you may put your own position at risk.

You could, of course, always recruit a handful of talented managers and then announce that they will have to fight it out for your job. Machiavelli would be proud of that political technique. But no retailer would try that, would they?