



# WHY SHOULD ANYONE BE LED BY YOU?

The challenge for leaders at any level in an organisation is to be themselves “but skilfully and in context”.

**By Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones**

**L**eadership is complicated—and the secrets of great leadership resist simple recipes. Successful leaders who share their insight and experience in published autobiographies give us important clues – but cannot provide ‘the answer’. And those aspiring leaders who attempt to mimic their heroes make a fatal error. The point is to be more like yourself, not more like someone else. No-one can write this particular recipe other than you. We doubt you’ll write it overnight. To be yourself more with skill is a life-long task.

Look to the leadership research for an answer to our question and you may also be disappointed. Too much of it has focused on individuals—neglecting the reality that

leadership is a relationship. What’s more, these individuals are often men at or near the tops of hierarchies. As we have pointed out, confusing hierarchy and leadership has been a fatal flaw undermining many discussions of leadership. Hierarchy can help you if you are a leader—but it can never explain your leadership.

‘Scientific’ attempts to measure the patterned differences of individuals who have acted as leaders have largely failed. The definitive list of leadership attributes has never been completed—because there isn’t one. And if there were it would need to be constantly changed as contexts shifted and relationships changed.

In effect, this explains why new recipes are appearing year in, year out. The recent fashion for so-called ‘quiet’ leaders—rather than the larger-than-life charismatic heroes celebrated

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during the 1990s—is yet another illustration of how style must fit context and era. As times change, so do our expectations of leaders.

OUR CENTRAL contention, then, is that leadership is situational, non-hierarchical and relational. You might feel this is almost common sense—but you would be surprised how often it is forgotten.

What's required of leaders will inevitably be shaped by context and relationships. A primary skill must be to sense these different contexts: to understand time and place and to respond accordingly. Effective leaders know the limits to

their actions as well as the opportunities; when to get close to others and when to separate; when to accelerate and when to slow down. Effective leaders cannot be properly explained by a list of desirable attributes. Their success stems from active engagement in a complex series of relationships carefully cultivated—often in contrasting contexts.

Those who get this right survive in order to fulfil their purpose. Those who get it wrong are often derailed. The high rates of CEO turnover that have attracted interest over recent years, for example, can be at least partially explained, in our terms, by poor situation sensing and an inability to connect with those whom these executives aspire to lead. But media attention on the failures of high-profile leaders should not lead us to the conclusion that these challenges are unique to senior executives.

The same challenges face leaders all over organisations. For leadership is non-hierarchical—and great organisations have leaders at many levels. Wherever they are their challenges are identical: to be themselves—but skilfully and in context. For it is the person we follow, not the position. The best of these individuals show enough of their authentic selves—their differences, passions, values and even weaknesses—to engage and excite their followers. Arguably, their authenticity has never been in greater demand.

WE CANNOT LET this pass. We must discuss the processes through which the leader is undone.

Perhaps, the most spectacular case is the demise of Greg Dyke as Director General of the BBC. As he puts it himself in his perceptive autobiography, Dyke went “from the most powerful media job in the UK to unemployed in just three days.” The man, who had made a bigger difference to the BBC than perhaps any leader in the last 50 years, was forced to resign

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by his own Board of Governors. Indeed, the stark choice was resign or be sacked. So what precipitated this dramatic reversal of Dyke's fortunes?

First, the bare bones of the story. On 29 May, 2003, a report by the BBC journalist Andrew Gilligan, on the Today Programme, the BBC's flagship radio news show, accused the UK Government, and in particular those close to Tony Blair, of “sexing up” the report of Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. This was the trigger for a confrontation between the BBC and the British Government that would cost the Corporation both its chairman, the former Goldman Sachs economist, Gavyn Davis, and its CEO, Greg Dyke. It culminated in the publication of the Hutton Report, Lord Hutton's enquiry into the events surrounding the dispute including the tragic suicide of Dr David Kelly, a senior weapons expert at the heart of the argument. The Hutton Report almost completely exonerated the Government and laid the blame for the mess wholly at the door of the BBC. Dyke was forced to stand down.

His resignation produced an extraordinary response from the employees—not famed for either their general happiness or their love of management. Thousands poured onto the streets—not just in London but in large regional centres and in the national capitals of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Herb Schlosser, former president and CEO of NBC, remarked “I saw on the internet BBC employees marching in support of a CEO. This is the first in the history of the Western world.” Part of this was stimulated by Greg Dyke's own leaving email, which we reproduce in full below. It is evidence of his strong emotional and intellectual connection to the BBC as an institution and to its people.

“This is the hardest email I've ever written. In a few moments I'll be announcing to the outside world that I'm leaving after four years as Director General. I don't want to go and I'll miss everyone here hugely. However the management of the BBC was heavily criticised in the Hutton Report and as Director General I am responsible for the management.

“I accept that the BBC made errors of judgement and I've sadly come to the conclusion

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HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL PRESS

→ that it will be hard to draw a line under this whole affair while I am still here. We need closure. We need closure to protect the future of the BBC, not for you or for me but for the benefit of everyone out there. It might sound pompous but I believe the BBC really matters. Throughout this affair my sole aim as Director General of the BBC has been to defend our editorial independence and to act in the public interest.

“In four years, we’ve achieved a lot between us. I believe we’ve changed the place fundamentally and I hope those changes will last beyond me. The BBC has always been a great organisation but I hope that, over the last four years, I’ve helped to make it a more human place where everyone who works here feels appreciated. If that’s anywhere near true I leave contented if sad.

“Thank you all for the help and support you’ve given me. This might sound schmaltzy but I really will miss you all. Greg.”

MORE THAN 6,000 employees responded to Dyke’s email—the overwhelming majority regretting the demise of their leader. In his account of the events, Dyke picks out two in particular. They provide eloquent testimony to the impact he had upon the organisation.

“Your greatest achievement was giving the kiss

## Effective leadership absolutely depends on the expression of authentic self.

of life to a body of people who’d been systematically throttled, castrated and lobotomised. To leave us very much alive and kicking, loving the BBC and respecting the role of Director General again, is a fantastic legacy.”

“I...pay testimony to the vision and energy you have brought to the BBC. Men and women, even journalists, cried today. People came together and talked about their emotions, their fears, their frustrations all because the man who had embodied the hope, the vision, the pride



## EVENT

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they had begun to feel about the future of the organisation had gone.”

All the evidence, including hard data on staff morale, shows that Dyke made a huge impact on this difficult organisation. How can it have happened that he was forced into an unhappy resignation?

Let us be clear. Our view is that his forced departure was extremely damaging to the organisation. He was and is an inspirational leader and there are things that all who aspire to leadership can learn from his experience. But there are lessons too in his demise. Dyke unquestionably made mistakes.

Effective leadership absolutely depends on the expression of authentic self. The simple maxim is: Be yourself. On this Dyke scored well. He is curious about himself—that is to say he pursues self-knowledge (up to a point) and is quite

prepared to disclose what he really cares about. He also reveals weakness—occasional temper outbursts, for example. But there is something more—a fatal flaw, perhaps. There is something of a pattern to his career. Dyke left the television company TV-AM after one year when he fell out badly with his Australian boss Bruce Gyngell. He subsequently lost the battle to retain control of his beloved London Weekend Television, beginning a feud with fund managers Mercury Asset Management, which still rankles. And finally he lost the biggest job in UK media and one of the most important broadcasting jobs in the world. The truth is Dyke loves a fight and he finds it very difficult to walk away from one. He acknowledges this himself at many points in his autobiography. For example, on the BBC’s response to the Hutton Report, he says: “On BBC News 24 it was immediately interpreted as

'a robust response' from the BBC. Personally, I thought it was conciliatory, but then being conciliatory is not necessarily one of my stronger points so perhaps I wasn't the best person to judge."

When LWT was acquired by Granada after a bitter struggle Dyke was invited to stay. He declined. He saw the new owners as "the enemy". For him, perhaps, the world is divided into friends and enemies a little too clearly.

Effective leadership requires high levels of situation sensing. Again, Dyke was excellent at identifying the low levels of morale among program-makers at the BBC. He had and has strong empathy with the talented creative people who make organisations like the BBC really fly. In addition, he identifies with people lower down the hierarchy—the catering staff, the security people, and the drivers—many of whom were among his greatest admirers. But what of his situation sensing among the Establishment figures who came to dominate the BBC's board of governors?

Initially Dyke tried to get on with them. But at the very core of his being he could not pretend to respect people he did not. It was a political game he refused to play. "I saw no reason why I should treat the governors any differently from the way I treated everyone else.

## Effective leaders need followers strong enough to challenge them on occasions.

I certainly wasn't going to regard the earth they walked on as if it was somehow holy ground.

This wasn't a wilful decision. It was just the way I am."

This was his undoing. In particular, Dyke underestimated the opposition of the governors he called the "posh ladies"—Baroness Hogg and Dame Pauline Neville-Jones. He knew they didn't like him, but believed at the height of the furore surrounding the Hutton Report that he had a deal with Dame Pauline, a long-time governor and former senior civil servant with strong links to the government machine, that he would stay. She had other ideas. Baroness Hogg also undermined Dyke's position by launching an attack on all he stood for.

When they delivered the news that he must resign or be sacked he was taken completely by surprise. "Of course, I should have seen it coming," he later acknowledged, "but I hadn't. I was completely shocked."

EFFECTIVE LEADERS IDENTIFY with those they lead. Again, Greg Dyke measures up well on this criterion. He genuinely identified with the creative people at the heart of his organisation. When asked to give a speech at the National Science Museum in London, for example, he began by showing extensive clips from the acclaimed BBC Science programs—Blue Planet and Walking with Dinosaurs. After a short pause he announced "this is the best science programming in the world".

Dyke was proud to lead an organisation that aspired to enrich people's lives in all it did. But in his response to the broadcast of a report which came perilously close to accusing the Prime Minister's office of lying, did he over-identify with the news team? Possibly. Perhaps, too, this was an occasion where discretion was indeed the better part of valour.

Finally, what of Dyke's followers? We may

never know for sure what advice he received from his top team, though in off-the-record conversations with us, several told us that he became so focused on defending the independence of the BBC (the critical issue as he saw it) that he was impervious to voices that suggested the Gilligan report was not the issue on which he should go to the barricades—and stake so much of what he had achieved.

Effective leaders need followers strong enough to challenge them on occasions. Authentic leaders require authentic followers; followers who care enough about the overarching purpose to challenge the leader's position if they feel his or her judgment is impaired. Further, leaders themselves must encourage strong followers. It is their obligation to ensure challenge. The real danger for charismatic leaders like Greg Dyke is that "nothing grows under the shade of a strong oak".

There remains the difficult question of what the consequences of Dyke's departure will have for the BBC. He certainly achieved a great deal in a relatively short period. With more time perhaps the cultural changes that he saw as essential and to which he devoted so much energy may have become embedded. But the signs are not good. Our research suggests that large parts of the BBC are already springing back to the way they were—introspective and a bit miserable. As one BBC insider we spoke to memorably put it, "no more happy-clappy stuff—it's back to business as usual."

The price of Dyke's forced departure may be that much of the change he produced proved sadly short-lived. Such is the prize and price of leadership.

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This is an edited extract from *Why Should Anyone Be Led by You? What it Takes to be an Authentic Leader*, by Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones (Harvard Business School Press, 2006). The book can be purchased from AHRI by contacting [bookshop@ahri.com.au](mailto:bookshop@ahri.com.au)



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