

What makes your leaders tick?

Getting a personal perspective on the people at the top

Psychologist R.Taylor interviewed 80 leaders, including chief executives, chairmen and managing directors of some of the leading organizations in the UK and US, in her bid to discover what makes leaders tick. In this article, she shares her findings, which cover everything from health and fitness levels to gender differences, and puts forward a top-ten list.

WHAT MAKES LEADERS TICK? To answer this question I interviewed 80 business leaders – I analysed their skills, their attitudes, their backgrounds and their working habits. And yes, they do work hard, but the compensation is that they just love it. They adore the accompanying limelight and recognition. And they seem to have a lot of fun being in charge.

I decided to ask questions of CEOs themselves, taking a face-to-face approach. I was interested in seeing their offices – the size, the décor and the art on their walls – and their secretaries were a fund of interesting information as they escorted us along corridors and into lifts. Their body language and often their replies spoke volumes as to whether the captain of industry I had just seen was a sweetheart to work for or a swine.

I was able to make contact with a wide range of leading executives, far more than I had expected, and I found them to be generally accessible and helpful. When they were not, I still attempted to talk to them to ensure that the results were not based purely on a self-selecting sample of “nice” directors. In general, I aimed at the top of the organizational tree and spoke to established chief executives, chairmen, managing directors and the like.

Who and what?

There were 59 men and 21 women in the sample – a 73 to 27 percent split. The average age of the group was 52 years, although the women appeared to be slightly younger, with an average age of 46 years. Sixty-six of our sample were based in the UK and 14 were American. The group included Dawn Airey at Channel 4, Nicholas Coleridge from Conde Nast, Charles Dunstone of Carphone Warehouse, Sir Rocco Forte of RF Hotels and Lord Gordon of Strathclyde of Scottish Radio Holdings.

I asked these leaders a number of open ended questions, which delved into the following topics:

- Interests outside work.
- Emotional intelligence.
- Family background.
- Financial awareness.
- Health.
- Sense of humour.
- Self awareness.
- Ability to network.
- Problem solving.
- Risk taking.
- Self confidence.
- Goal setting.
- Team work.
- Training.
- Education.
- Work experience.
- Drive for success.

Just like the rest of us

Board directors are not a race apart. As I carried out the interviews I found myself in the company of bright, hardworking people, but not creatures from another planet. They had a variety of IQ's, expertise and backgrounds. In other words, directors are just like the rest of us – and their positions are up for grabs.

The majority of the group had degrees – 73 out of 80 (91 percent of the sample). The notables who did not go to university were Charles Dunstone of Carphone Warehouse, Julian Richer of Richer Sounds, and Charles Allan, formerly of the Granada Group. It has to be said that this was not the norm and in fact 30 (37 percent) had second degrees or diplomas of some sort, with MBA's being the most popular.

Type of degree seemed to be of little relevance to final choice of career in many cases. There was an expectation before we started the project that accountancy, business and finance backgrounds would proliferate, but in fact only 15 executives had listed these as their primary field of study. There was just about everything recorded in this section, including veterinary science, American studies, psychology, social sciences, media, law, catering and tourism.

“Male executives need emotional stability to achieve business success, but women don't.”

The skills that matter

Brian Davis of the Nationwide Building Society, for example, was trained as a rocket scientist. When asked if his original expertise was utilized at all in his current position as CEO, he strongly felt that his early training had developed a powerful analytical ability that had stood him in good stead.

Interpersonal skills are all-important. The directors were nearly always charming, persuasive and eloquent. Where they had faced challenges or found they had to acquire new skills, these were mostly behavioral rather than “technical” subjects like computing and finance. These technical areas are like Herzberg's “hygiene factors” – you have to have them, but more of them does not lead to more success and does not guarantee success in the absence of interpersonal skills.

Strength and resilience

Energy is essential. We commonly found people working 80-100 hour weeks, with punishing schedules and little time for relaxation. They had a great drive for success, and a commitment to their businesses and their employees. To keep up the pace they needed to be aware of their health and to stay fit.

Directors are resilient. They cope with stress well, often saying that their work is not actually stressful.

They often use distancing strategies by calling work a game, by retreating to other interests when necessary, or by using their domestic life as a cut off from business pressures. They are also a very healthy group, with only 10 percent having had any significant illness. John Spence is one of this 10 percent and is a remarkable example of a man who gradually became blind over the last few years. This disability did not deter him from becoming chief executive of TSB Scotland.

The personal aspects

Male executives need emotional stability to achieve business success, but women don't. The majority of men claimed that when things went wrong at home, they could not concentrate at work. In some cases their current stability had been hard won as they were into their third marriage. Women were different. When women had trouble with relationships, they channelled their energies into work. In fact, one young female chief executive, Tanya Goodin, who had set up her own website company, was worried that her recent marriage would make her so happy that she would lose her competitive edge.

Senior people do not set personal goals for success. This surprising finding is against the trend of conventional management wisdom. However, the fact is that relatively few of the interviewees had followed a planned road to success based on clearly identified personal goals. Most were essentially clever opportunists able to seize the moment when it came their way. When asked the reasons for their success, by far the most common answer was “luck.” However they did set goals for the business just not for themselves

The learnability factor

Despite the “learnability” of the ingredients of success, very few organizations taught these skills and the group themselves had very little formal training for their senior positions. Once there, very few updated their skills. If their organizations provided for continuous development, it was invariably for other people. However, it is worth remembering that those in CEO corporate jobs, for the most part, had second degrees and MBAs.

Fun and interesting people

Top people are fun and interesting. Despite their punishing work schedule, our group had a wide range of interests that they actively pursued. From sailing to opera, rollerblading to egg cup collecting, successful people live life to the full. It is clear

1. Board directors are not from another planet – they are bright and hardworking people.
2. Most have degrees, with nearly 40 percent having second degrees or diplomas, but the topics studied vary greatly and do not tend to be business or finance related.
3. Interpersonal skills are strong – leaders are charming and eloquent.
4. Leaders are energetic, resilient and, for the most part, healthy.
5. Male executives need emotional stability, female executives do not.
6. Very few top executives receive leadership skills training, despite the learnability of the ingredients for success.
7. Top people are fun and interesting and bring a range of experiences to their roles.
8. They tend to be self confident, but have to learn patience and tolerance.

that part of what they bring to their businesses is a breadth of vision that comes from having had a wide range of experiences.

Successful people love work. A real secret of success is undoubtedly loving the job. Our group made no sharp distinction between their working lives and their social lives and did not begrudge the intrusion of work into personal time. In fact, when Charles Dunstone of Carphone Warehouse was asked how he coped with the pressures of work, he could not relate to the question. His answer was: “I just love what I do. There is simply no pressure involved in that.”

Natural versus learned skills

Self-confidence goes with the job. Some of our interviewees were born confident, for others it came with the job. While few were completely nerveless, virtually all rated their self-confidence as “high.” This seems to be an essential requirement since all recognized the need to speak up for themselves, to argue effectively with senior colleagues and to be the focus of attention in a range of business situations.

Patience and tolerance had to be learned. When asked what major skills had to be learned to execute their senior posts, overwhelmingly the two most common answers were “patience” and “tolerance.” It seems that these characteristics are not the natural behavior of those who succeed, but simply have to be learned to make progress in the corporate environment.

It is understandable that these thrusting, energetic individuals might expect everyone around them to be the same, and of course they are not. Claire McGrath, director at Pfizer, put it so succinctly when she said that she had to “stop being a razor blade.”

The ten things that make leaders tick

After the interviews I was left with a huge volume of information to condense into key findings. The result is “The ten things that make leaders tick,” which serve to demonstrate the attributes that most strongly and

repeatedly emerge as the definers of business leaders. They are:

1. Problem solving

The number one rated characteristic is the ability to solve problems in a crisis. Business success depends on being the person who stays constructive and creative when the going is tough. You need to see that there is always a way through, even when those around you have given up.

2. Delivering the goods

Successful people know what has to be done, and they need to achieve results. The key is the development of a results focus in which the end point is clearly understood and there is a sense of urgency in striving to get there. Once there, of course, new goals are set and the process begins again.

3. Wanting to win

Those at the top have a drive to become successful and see this as an objective in its own right. They enjoy winning for the sake of it and often think of business life as a game. Their secret is an understanding of the rules and a real desire to master them.

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4. Relating

Our survey of leaders shows that they prize the ability to work with a wide variety of people. Leaders have learned to stay close to their customers and their employees. They take time to relate to other people and are empathetic, communicative and supportive. They also handle difficult people skillfully and value a happy domestic life.

5. Trusting the team

Success is not achieved in isolation. Our directors knew that they had neither the time nor the ability to do everything themselves, and were highly dependent on finding and keeping the right team. Finding business partners and then trusting them is a key business skill.

Nicola Horlick of SG Asset Management, for example, said that she could not have achieved continuing business success without her team, especially when she experienced domestic tragedy. So reliant are leaders on their teams that they, like Nicola Horlick, take their existing teams with them when they move on to new organizations.

6. De-stressing

Directors consistently give a high rating to their ability to cope with stress and recognize that managing stress is now a business essential. There are many approaches to stress management, but the key is awareness and prevention. In this, as in other aspects of business, successful people take control.

7. Loving change

When I asked our sample of leaders whether they liked change, they told me that not only did they love change but saw their ability to initiate change as crucial to their success. Embracing change, and recognizing that it is now a necessary part of business life, is an essential.

8. Knowing yourself

I was consistently impressed with the responses when I asked the directors what they saw as their strengths and weaknesses. Without hesitation they listed their talents, and then their failings. Their failings were always less in number than their strengths. Confident self-knowledge is obviously the building block for progressing in business. Not for them false humility!

9. Striking a deal

This skill relates to the ability to negotiate. Leaders need to achieve “win-win” outcomes with partners and providers. They have the creativity to construct a proposition from which everyone will gain, the toughness not to relinquish more than they can afford, and the charisma to steer the encounter to a successful conclusion.

10. Being confident

Some of the CEO's in our sample were born confident, for others it came with the job. While few were completely nerveless, virtually all rated their confidence as high. This seems to be an essential requirement since they need to speak up for themselves inside and outside the organization, to argue effectively with senior colleagues and to be the focus of attention in a range of business situations.

Seeing what other people see

Figure 1, right, shows this list again. Why don't you rate yourself, or get your leaders to rate themselves, on these skills using a rating of 1 to 10 – 1 means poor, whereas 10 denotes proficiency. Now, of course, you may not be able to see yourself as others see you (who can?), so you, or your leaders, may want to check the results against a colleague's. Discovering and discussing discrepancies in impressions should prove enlightening, as the following example demonstrates.

Mike was an engineer of long experience and distinction. He began to wonder why other younger engineers were promoted to board level above him, especially when he deemed them less competent. He

Figure 1. The ten skills rating

The ten skills	Rating scale	
	110 poor	proficien
1. Problem solving		
2. Delivering the		
3. Wanting to win		
4. Relating		
5. Trusting the team		
6. De-stressing		
7. Loving change		
8. Knowing yourself		
9. Striking a deal		
10. Being confident		

decided to ask his managing director for feedback as to his lack of progression. His boss took the opportunity to tell him that he was inconsiderate of other staff, he failed to communicate what he was doing so his talent was never passed on and he was very aggressive with the women in his team. In fact, the managing director told him that one of his colleagues described him as an “animal.” You can imagine he was nonplussed to say the least. His view of himself was a rather cuddly engineer and father of two.

When he started to reflect on how he had become so lacking in people skills, he realized that he was completely orientated towards machines. On the shop floor he would cast people aside in his bid to get to the machine. And, of course, he did not get promoted. This feedback was the best thing that could have happened. He acquired the requisite training and has now risen to be director of the company.

