

# Looking after your leaders

Bad leadership can create a toxic culture, lead to low staff morale and result in business failure, so how can HR nurture leaders to avoid letting talent go to waste? Natalie Cooper reports.

**U**K business leaders are in crisis. The recent Richmond Events *Leadership Report*, which surveyed 500 senior directors of UK organisations, found that 43% felt that their leadership skills could be greatly improved. Only 2% believed they were good enough already and two-thirds said they experienced anxiety about their leadership abilities.

So what can HR professionals do to nurture leaders in their organisations?

According to leadership coach Ros Taylor, poor leadership could cost the UK its market edge over European competitors.

"When I am brought in to coach leadership teams, including CEOs and other board members, I frequently find that they are quite literally clinging on by their fingernails. They are on the brink of committing professional suicide because they don't know who to turn to, and feel physically exhausted and mentally destroyed," she says.

When leaders are promoted to senior or board level positions, the expectation is that leadership should come automatically, she suggests. "Quite often, newly-elected lead-

ers are expected to run the race but have not been allowed to train for it."

Leaders often feel isolated at the top but don't want to admit it, and this is where HR can help.

"HR needs to be proactive in identifying any potential signs of stress or anxiety in their leaders," says Taylor. "Aggressive or withdrawn behaviour – external symptoms of stress – can cascade down throughout an organisation."

If this is the case in your organisation, it may be worth informally approaching one of the shareholders closest to your top executives to see if they can find out what the trouble is.

## Eyes and ears

If your CEO or board leaders are cut off from the rest of the company, it could indicate an unhealthy business culture, warns Taylor. "Rates of absenteeism soar in toxic cultures, so HR should always keep an eye on staff retention and turnover, and conduct exit interviews to identify pockets of weak leadership," she explains.

Joyce Woodrow, company director of HR at Starbucks Coffee, believes that HR needs



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Roger Black: Leaders need to have a clear vision and be prepared to take risks.

to work closely with business leaders, be the conscience of the organisation and hold a mirror up to the business. "Be the eyes and ears of the organisation, watching out for early warning signs, feeding back and challenging the business if it seems to be going off course," she says. "Help staff understand what they can do to meet the company goals by conducting regular 360-degree feedback, performance reviews, and introduce coaching and mentoring. Gain partner feedback from stores and support centres, as well as hold weekly business updates."

She advises that staying true to and focusing on your mission statement and guiding principles will help you do the right thing for

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your partners, customers and community.

There are also lessons to be learned from leaders in other arenas, not just business. Olympic 400m medallist and now motivational speaker Roger Black, speaking exclusively to *Personnel Today*, believes that leaders need to have a clear vision, be prepared to take risks and, most importantly, to have access to the trusted counsel of other leaders.

"Whether you are trying to win an Olympic medal or run a business, you need to have vision and drive, be able to adapt and know how to cope with failure or defeat. But most of all, leaders need to be able to share their journey with someone," he says.

## Be intuitive

In Black's case, he turned to fellow athlete Kriss Akabusi. "Without Kriss, I would not have achieved half of what I did. He was my counsel during my work day when I was training on the track. He kept me going, when I may have started drifting. And the moment the vision goes it's over."

Ali Gill, Olympic oarswoman and now director of talent management consultancy Getfeedback, believes that HR needs to encourage leaders to avoid acting on a whim, but at the same time be intuitive about what's going on in the organisation.

"Leading in uncertainty requires HR to guide leaders to stay attuned to the emerging storylines, listen for underlying issues and emotions and then act to prevent negative emotions gaining momentum," she says.

One way to ensure that any negative issues don't cascade down through the rest of the organisation is to make sure leadership isn't purely about seniority, says Niall Hadden, global head of talent management at brand communications company Bartle Bogle Hegarty.

"We see leadership as a non-hierarchical



KAREN BRADY: It's up to HR managers to look after their top teams.

concept, that focuses on empowerment and persuasion at all levels within the organisation," he explains.

Hadden believes it's important to monitor leaders to make sure that their development needs are addressed and that they feel supported in their roles. There is a strong commercial argument to do this well, particularly when it comes to succession planning, he says. "You should be setting the agenda on identifying leadership potential and development activities. Young talent within the group needs to have access to the people who set up the business, and are able to observe the leadership behaviours."

"All too often the HR function takes a reactive position on this, which undermines the potential value of its contribution, as the early identification of potential leaders is very important," he adds.

## Keep your top team healthy

Finally, be aware of the health of the leaders in your organisation. Sue Higgins, managing director of HR consultancy Inspira, believes that your business is only as healthy

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## HIRING LEADERS

What characteristics should HR look for when hiring leaders for the organisation? According to Sibylle Erdmann, project director at employee research and consultancy Towers Perrin ISR, it helps to base interviews not just on the track records of candidates, but also consider any personal characteristics and management styles the organisation requires from its leaders. For example:

- Customer service-focused companies should look for leaders who will empower their employees, actively demonstrate that they support the organisation's values and act with integrity in all of their dealings.

- Organisations that focus on efficiency need leaders who will encourage employees to think for themselves and get involved in decision making.

- Where organisations are more based on image, leaders should have the ability to build credibility both internally and externally.

- Leaders in innovative organisations should allow employees to take risks.

- In organisations centred on quality, leaders should be concerned for the wellbeing of employees and encourage the free exchange of information between different departments.

as your top team. A serious illness or death of a chief executive, she says, can have a lasting emotional as well as commercial impact on an organisation.

This is why it is worth considering an investment in preventative health plans at work, according to business manager Michele Joseph of specialist health clinic chain Preventicum. She cites the example of Karen Brady, managing director of Birmingham City Football Club, who visited one of Preventicum's clinics in 2006 and found she had a brain aneurism. Brady was rushed in for emergency surgery and was back at her desk within weeks.

"With many top leaders commanding six-figure salaries, it's well worth investing in preventative treatment to eliminate risk factors," says Joseph.

As the workplace evolves and budgets are cut, many senior executives have assumed wider responsibilities than they were used to and feel under greater pressure than before, warns Brady.

"There is so much in business that is left to the lap of the gods, that it is the job of every good HR manager to ensure that everything can be done to look after its top team," she says.

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## LOOKING AFTER YOUR LEADERS

Noel Clerkin, co-founder of coaching company Inspiring Potential, offers HR these tips:

- Encourage leaders to tackle issues of stress and low morale in the organisation.

- Inspire leaders to create a culture of dignity and respect in the workplace, by actively defining and promoting positive working relationships.

- Help the top team to lead by example and to follow the espoused values of the organisation by providing training.

- Support leaders by providing an executive coach or mentor who can help them to build their self awareness, set better goals, identify their development needs, overcome their personal challenges and improve their effectiveness, decision-making, work relationships and creativity.

- Present networking opportunities where leaders can meet peers who can give them a different perspective about their role and the organisation.

- Help leaders unlock the talent within the organisation.