

60 Second Leader

A Drive to Soar can lead to a Plummet

A drive to achieve can serve you well in life. It can also undermine your leadership.

David McLelland, the late Harvard psychologist who studied motivation and leadership, identified achievement as one of the three primary internal drivers. I have noticed that most managers I work with report this drive to achieve as their dominant characteristic. This is not surprising: every organisation promotes people who deliver results and make them more competitive.

But, as our responsibilities grow, this could be the very thing that undermines our leadership.

High achievers are often great at solving problems and providing energetic direction. It is true that some, faced with increasing pressure and complexity in their role, become insecure and controlling, fearful of failure and eager to protect their image. But those who cope can be equally controlling and stifle those they lead. [1]

A key for all leaders

A key for all leaders is to learn to empower others.

But such behaviour doesn't come easily. We need to re-define our view of success, recognise our limitations, and take pride in releasing the potential of others. This can protect us from being over-burdened in leadership and also from the boredom of so-called 'summit syndrome' where we heroically succeed but find the very goals we have reached unsatisfying and transient. [2]



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Pete has 25 years experience in leadership, consultancy and training, including a spell as Chief Executive in the voluntary sector.

He has been involved with Cygnet since its inception. Pete has experience with clients at all levels, including board level. He is in particular demand for strategy meeting facilitation for SMTs and Boards.

Cygnet can help your organisation achieve its business goals by

Attending your own funeral

One suggestion (not original) to help you re-define your concept of success: imagine colleagues lining up at your funeral to say what your life has meant for them. What would you like them to say? Might it be more about how you helped them and the organisation to succeed, than about your own individual accomplishments?

If so, how can you use that strong drive to achieve to make it so?

1. Leadership Run Amok: Spreier, Fontane & Malloy, HBR June 2006
2. Crisis at the Summit: Parsons & Pascale, HBR March 2007

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