

Tough lessons on leadership

It has become generally accepted that our organisations need better leadership if they are to survive and prosper in these difficult times. Well-led companies know that leaders are made, not born, and invest in the development of their future managers. But, in spite of the energy devoted to leadership development, the return on investment rarely comes up to the hopes and expectations of participating executives or company sponsors. As ever, the question is 'Can leadership be learned?'

Most of us can agree on basic definitions. Simply stated, leaders are people who:

- Establish a new direction or goal for a group;
- Gain the support, cooperation and commitment of those they need to move in that new direction;
- Motivate them to overcome obstacles in the way of the company's goals.

Consider the experience of a manager called Anne. After a steady rise through the functional ranks in logistics and distribution, Anne found herself unable to handle a proposal for a radical reorganisation that came from outside her division. Accustomed to planning for annual improvements in her basic business strategy, she failed to notice changing priorities in the wider market.

Although she had built a loyal, high-performing team, she had few networks outside her group to help her anticipate the new demands. Worse, she was assessed by her boss as lacking the broader business picture. Frustrated, Anne thought about leaving.