



Learning from the boss

Wherever your sporting allegiance lies, there is no denying Sir Alex Ferguson's achievement as a leader. **Alan Denton** looks at what executives can learn from his style and methods

While Sir Alex Ferguson will go down in football history as one of the most successful managers ever, this wasn't always the case. By his own admission, the early years at Manchester United were difficult – a time in which the team failed to win a single trophy. However, he believed in building a solid foundation for the future, saying: 'The time we need self-belief most is when things are not going well. Anyone can be positive in good times.'

So, how can managers in business build that self-belief when others doubt their ability and methods – and how can they create a positive outlook with staff when the results they are working towards are not yet coming through? In my experience of coaching leaders in many sectors of business, a lack of self-belief is one of the key factors responsible for lowering performance and increasing potential for failure.

A winning formula

So what did Alex Ferguson do that made him and Manchester United so successful? In essence, he built a series of great teams. He believed in his methods and his people, but ruthlessly removed them if they failed to perform. Once he had built his first team, he repeated this 'secret formula' time and again, continuing to blend different experiences, skill-sets and personalities – a formula that can be copied easily in business.

Ferguson knew how to lead a team. His model is sometimes referred to as being predicated on 'followership'. In other words, you cannot be appointed a leader; you only achieve this status if others actively and voluntarily follow you. While Ferguson's image in the media is fashioned by stories of aggression, 'hairdryer' incidents and apparently harsh treatment of some players, this cannot be the whole truth as he has attracted fierce 'followership' from successive teams over several decades.

It's fair to say that leaders in business rarely have the luxury of a four-year timescale to prove themselves. However, I'd argue that Ferguson's immense self-belief and sense of purpose engaged those around him, including the key stakeholders. There are numerous examples of senior executives standing their ground over a significant period of time, demonstrating a certainty that has enabled them to deliver amazing results.

Pressure to perform

Many senior executives will find themselves under tremendous pressure to deliver results fast in their first few months of a new appointment or promotion. However, I'd question whether this pressure is predominantly external or internal. It's true that results have to be delivered, but it's my experience that many executives put themselves under excessive and unnecessary pressure – often in itself a catalyst for failure.

In fact, one of the fundamental miscommunications of the newly appointed or promoted is that first interaction with key

stakeholders – most particularly the boss. Having got the job because of what they can do and what they know, newly appointed executives commonly forget the need to check-in – in a meaningful way – with the boss as to his or her specific delivery needs. In extreme cases, new recruits immediately create a fixed idea of what the job entails – with very little thought – arrive on day one, and start to 'deliver.' This often entails setting off at a tremendous pace, changing things here, there and everywhere while heading determinedly in a particular direction that they think is right. Days, weeks, or months later, they and their boss find the direction was completely wrong.

Knowing or being

This key distinction of knowing and doing versus 'being' the leader was something that Alex Ferguson grasped from day one – yet many executives miss this point entirely. Ferguson knew that he would not be the person kicking the ball, scoring goals or defending. His purpose was to enrol, engage, delegate, motivate and communicate at a distance.

Enrolling your team (in football or business) in the ethos, expected outcomes and goals is essential for success. As a new leader, engagement and communication of the message that you want to send is crucial – even if it takes longer than anticipated. Delegating responsibility through clear communication and using praise when appropriate are both key skills.

Not only did Ferguson exhibit all the skills detailed above, he also demonstrated two parallel strategies – tremendous teambuilding and loyalty, combined with a ruthless streak that weeded out team members who no longer contributed.

Keeping it fresh

How often do we find examples in business of a team that has gone stale, or, individual performance that has gone off the boil because it's seen as 'too difficult' to deal with? The current trend for performance management as a universal tool for motivating people and solving problems is not something I subscribe to – and neither, I suspect, would Ferguson. That's not to say that formal appraisals or performance reviews are a bad thing – they aren't. However, in my experience, the system often becomes a substitute for good management and leadership practice in the form of excellent day-to-day communication and relatedness.

I doubt if anyone misunderstood Ferguson's message at any time. He steered his team through good times and bad, demonstrating a brilliant ability to bounce back in the face of adversity and to stand his ground.

In the current economic climate, the challenge in business – whether you're a new leader or an established one – is to enrol and engage your people and the wider business in the vision, ethos and desired results that you want to achieve. Leadership is not an appointment; it is only given by those who choose to follow. **bex**



ALAN DENTON is MD and one of a team of business coaches at The Results Centre. Alan regularly coaches newly-appointed senior executives across a range of sectors including pharmaceuticals, retail, manufacturing, recruitment, engineering, financial services, property and the legal sector. He has created several leadership and transformational programmes, including the First 101 Days Programme.