

Leaders

who serve the common good

Sustainable leadership, says Prof Laetitia van Dyk, depends on developing leaders who are a great deal more than capable. They must demonstrate integrity, vision, accountability and stewardship, she tells PENNY HAW.



IT IS THE 21ST CENTURY, and we are talking about resisting complacency and developing leaders for the future by means of leading-edge education. Even so, history, it seems, is a potent teacher and we continue to learn from legendary leading lights, like 4th century BC philosopher and teacher, Aristotle, and 20th century management visionary, Peter Drucker. Indeed, says the new head of the USB's Centre for Leadership Studies, Prof Laetitia van Dyk, their wisdom applies as much to leadership today as it ever did.

She begins: "Many years ago, Drucker said, 'In the next society, the biggest challenge for the corporation may be social legitimacy, its values, its missions'. We are now in the era that he envisaged and, despite the immense contribution of business to economic growth and improvement in people's lives, many ordinary citizens are becoming increasingly cynical about the role of business in society and the credibility of organisational leadership, both in the private and public sectors."

Citing corporate governance scandals, such as those surrounding Enron, WorldCom, Vivendi Universal, Brett Kebble and Fidentia, as examples, Van Dyk is among a growing number of commentators who believe that many modern-day business leaders are experiencing "an increasingly serious crisis of legitimacy".

"These scandals have consistently shown that leaders who fail, both financially and morally, seldom do so because they lack expertise," she says. "Instead, as former provost of the University of Dallas Thomas Lindsay explains, they fail because they lack interpersonal skills and practical wisdom. They do not have what Aristotle called 'prudence'. He taught that genuine leadership is about the ability to identify and serve the common good. This requires much more than technical training. It requires education in moral reasoning that many believe is not prevalent enough in conventional MBA programmes, which tend rather to perpetuate a business approach based on greed and self-interest."

It is generally accepted that business schools are potentially powerful and positive transmitters of good around the globe. They can, emphasises Van Dyk, "help promote such notions of good global citizenship on the part of business, by providing educational experiences that the next generation of leaders will integrate into their own management awareness and philosophies."

Fundamental to achieving this potential, she argues, is to ensure that students not only learn about credible leadership and the theories that underpin it, but that they also acquire the skills that enable them to apply it. They need to learn actively through guided reflection and experimentation, which is taught via a combination of learning techniques and requires innovative methods of assessment.

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They can stick to the inertia of business as usual, or lead an international business movement in the quest for sustainability," says Van Dyk, quoting Dr Ralph Hamman of the University of South Africa's Centre for Corporate Citizenship.

Education for sustainability needs to go beyond cognitive dimensions, and future business leaders require levels of emotional intelligence that will enable them to move from a narrow group mentality to a broader vision of collective benefit.

The challenge for business schools, she believes, is to develop leaders rather than to teach students about the nature of leadership. Schools are responsible for enriching business environments by emphasising good corporate governance, sound business ethics, anti-corruption practices, conflict resolution, negotiation skills, and creative entrepreneurial management for small- and medium-sized enterprise development.

"As David Kirby of the University of Surrey School of Management has said, if we want to create leaders, rather than just managers and administrators, the nature of management education needs to change. This means reducing relative emphasis on the traditional management functions, adopting a more integrated and holistic approach to management, and increasing the emphasis on personal effectiveness. It also implies that we will have to switch from 'educating about' to 'educating for' and thereby shift the emphasis from knowledge acquisition and testing to capability development and demonstration."

Following from this, Van Dyk says it is evident that leadership development needs to be more personalised, with increased focus on the individual to ensure that he or she significantly enhances his or her authentic leadership capabilities and personal effectiveness.

"This is not to say that we can disregard the needs and expectations of the end-users of our education products, namely employers," she continues. "Employers call for leadership skills and attributes by means of which knowledge can be effectively acted on. But, on another equally important level, leadership development must nurture integrity, judgment and intuition, and produce leaders who are more thoughtful, aware, sensitive, flexible and adaptable – people trained to think, decide and act efficiently and innovatively in today's complex and unstable world." >



Prof Laetitia van Dyk,
head of the USB's Centre
for Leadership Studies

