

What makes a leader great?

Interview with Manfred Kets de Vries

Manfred Kets de Vries holds the Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Chair in Human Resource Management and is Clinical Professor of Management and Leadership at the European Institute of Business Administration (INSEAD). Furthermore, he is the Director of INSEAD's Global Leadership Center.

He is also Program Director of INSEAD's top management program: "The Challenge of Leadership: Developing your Emotional Intelligence". He has lectured at management institutions worldwide, and has acted as a consultant in organizational design/transformation and strategic human resource management for leading US, Canadian, European, African and Asian companies.

Manfred Kets de Vries brings a different view to the much-studied subjects of leadership and the dynamics of individual and organizational change. Bringing to bear his knowledge and experience of economics, management, and psychoanalysis, Kets de Vries scrutinizes the interface between international management, psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, and dynamic psychiatry.

In this interview, he discusses his latest publication *Are leaders born or are they made? The case of Alexander the Great* and the implications his findings have for the modern business leader.

What inspired you to write a book about Alexander the Great's leadership style?

When the e-bubble was at its peak I received a number of questions from journalists about leadership in this "new" economy. I would tell them that although people have created this technology, a lot of the principles of leadership remain the same. You can still learn from figures such as Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan and Napoleon. Finally, after repeating this sentiment over and over, I decided to look at these people in depth and make sure that what I was saying was indeed the case!

I have always been interested in Alexander the Great, particularly the kinds of things he did in such a short life and I tried to do two things with this book. First, to perform a brief psycho-history in order to make some sense of his personality, and second, I tried to use Alexander as a metaphor for the do's and don'ts of leadership.

One of the clear warnings here is of course that power corrupts – the saying that absolute power corrupts absolutely is true young and old leaders alike. You also find that the young leaders use many principles of leadership in order to become really effective but then, as they get older and attain more power, narcissism takes over and they start to self-destruct. This has been demonstrated recently with all those leaders who have transgressed all number of boundaries.

It is always the same formula. The moment you are in a powerful position for too long you start to think that the rules are not for you but for others. It is what the Greek call "Hubris", a state of

excessive pride. In France there is the famous case of Jean-Marie Messier of Vivendi, in the US there was Enron and Tyco, and in the UK media mogul Conrad Black is an interesting example of someone who believed that the normal rules of behavior were not for him. Sometimes I joke that the moment you find yourself on the cover of *Fortune* or *Business Week*, it is the beginning of the end because you start to believe your own press, you start to surround yourself with yes-men and yes-women and technically you go down the drain.

You have said previously that you admired Jack Welch's form of leadership. Do you think he was an exception to the rule as he appeared on the front of these magazines and continued to be successful?

Yes, he managed not to self-destruct! However in the end there was the executive compensation scandal as a result of his acrimonious divorce. That was a sad ending in a way because Welch was probably the most famous executive of the twentieth century. But in the end greed also took over.

In general I must say that Jack Welch did spectacularly well – he stayed in power a long time and was helped by very good checks and balances in the form of a strong executive team. And despite being a very formidable character, he tried to create an atmosphere where you were able to have a healthy disrespect for your boss, which is very rarely found within an organization.

For a while now I have run a seminar entitled “The Challenge of Leadership: Developing your Emotional Intelligence”. CEOs from across the globe come to INSEAD to discuss leadership and management issues. And because they are coming so far and are surrounded by like-minded executives, they are free to talk about really meaningful issues rather than just to give the party line. Usually you can only get an inkling of what is going on when you do traditional interviews, as these CEOs do not want to talk about their real issues. Consequently they present a façade – the “false self” syndrome – which is unfortunately part of life.

But this seminar becomes a safe “transitional space” that I have created so you hear more about executive’s anxieties and their concerns. In the process I try to create more healthy organizations. For example in that seminar, those 20 people together may be responsible for 100,000 people. If I can help these CEOs become a little understanding and more emotionally intelligent then it may have a positive effect on the organization.

In your book you described Alexander's narcissistic tendencies. Do you find that narcissism is a common theme amongst leaders today?

Basically many of these very driven people are quite insecure over-achievers and what you often find with this sort of person (and this is something of an over simplification) are internalized parental figures who tell you that you are never good enough and you can always do better.

In this context you often find that male leaders have a very supportive mother, which was, of course, the case with Jack Welch. His mother never thought she would have children and had a history of heart trouble in her family. Because she thought she was not going to live very long she would use this as a kind of blackmail – “please be better at this or that and do it for me in the few years I have to live”. She was a very important role model.

Another common trait of this type of male leader is the absence of a father figure. In the case of Alexander the Great, his father (Phillip) was present but not directly involved in the education of his son and did not give him the encouragement and praise that Alexander craved. He became a symbol of someone he had to compete with. And as Phillip was quite formidable in his own right, this became quite a challenge.

Is this the case also with female leaders?

Female leaders are different. However, because the majority of participants at my seminar are male I have a much smaller sample and therefore do not think that the last word has been said on the subject. I believe (and I may be somewhat shooting from the hip) there are three constellations of female leaders.