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Humility in leadership

We have had two years now to digest the findings and the conclusions in *Good to Great*, the book that propelled Jim Collins, its author, into an elite band of management gurus who can command the sort of appearance fees that are normally charged by former presidents.

The UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development paid Mr Collins \$100,000 (£60,000) to spend an hour and a half speaking at its conference in Harrogate last week. Most of what he said was in the book but the Harrogate faithful do not seem to mind that. They appreciate a stylish performance and Mr Collins' delivery was as polished as they come.

For those who might appreciate a *Good to Great* refresher, Mr Collins says - and he has the evidence to support his argument - that great companies are not led by "gung-ho" or charismatic types. Instead, the best companies are run by quiet, dogged people who put the business first and, above everything, combine a sense of humility with a will to succeed.

This should not be such a surprise. The late Robert Greenleaf was saying something similar in 1970 when he coined the term "servant-leadership" to describe people who put their workforce and their company before themselves.

Mr Collins has added substance to the servant-leadership concept. But, in spite of the convincing evidence he can produce to support his theories, his message has still to get through to recruiters. I do not hear headhunters saying they are looking for modest, self-effacing types. But I do still hear people saying they are looking for charisma. This has been at the heart of the Conservative party's leadership struggle in the UK.

Do the politicians not know that charisma is out of fashion? It tends to emerge at times of crisis. Recall the way that New Yorkers rallied to Rudolph Giuliani, their mayor, after September 11 2001. But most of the time it gets in the way. People spend too much time worrying about the whims of their boss rather than the demands of the job.

Instinctively I think we like upfront identifiable leaders because then we have someone to blame for our own inadequacies. So the easiest way to deal with tough organisational problems is to sack the boss and get a new one.

Most of the successful people identified in the research behind Mr Collins' book had come up through the ranks, suggesting that there is scope for the best people to excel in those companies that have learnt how to operate an effective meritocracy.

"Those who grew up with the problems were the source of solutions," says Mr Collins, emphasising the importance of selection. "People are not your most important asset. The right people are," he said. "If you are so good at picking people that you don't have to spend a whole lot of time worrying about what those people do or worrying about their inadequacies, your life becomes a lot easier."

There was some validity, then, in this message for an audience of human resources managers. But what should we make of a conference session featuring an on-stage

interview with Sven Goran Eriksson, manager of the England football team? In many ways Mr Eriksson appears to fit the Good to Great leadership mould. He is modest personified and always credits the team's success to the players and the rest of the backroom staff.

There is no complex formula in the Eriksson way. He acknowledges Tord Grip, his number two, as the strongest influence on his management style and admits that he takes advice from his most experienced players. Asked how he deals with poor individual performances he said: "In football it's very easy. You don't pick the player." Asked the secret of management success in football, he said the first thing was "to have good football players", the second was to respect people and the third was to keep things simple.

Apparently Mr Eriksson is keen to do more on the conference circuit. But are these lessons so valuable for a broader management audience? As a friend pointed out to me, "Football is a sport and people like to play. You don't need to be motivated to play for England but turning up to your office every day is not the same. In a game that mainly tends to be managed by pitch-side ranters who know no better, a quietly spoken Swede is bound to stand out."

Whether or not his methods can be translated into business management, Mr Eriksson might learn a few things from other conference speakers. The first lesson, which he has already digested, is that conference speaking can attract big bucks.

There is a misconception that A-list speakers are television personalities who work the after-dinner circuit. But the biggest hitters, apart from ex-presidents, are those US management school professors who have mastered the art of asking the right questions, collecting and marshalling the empirical evidence and packaging their ideas in an entertaining talk.

Mr Collins has turned this process into an industry, breaking away from formal academia to run his own research consultancy. More than that, he lives the kind of leadership he espouses. You would not find him on the golf course with Jack Welch. His idea of a good time is to go rock-climbing. He gets his research ideas from listening to the most challenging questions of his students. He has also followed a logical path, working first on what makes good companies, then on what makes the exceptional few. His next step is to examine ways of spreading this learning across other sectors of society.

The \$64m question, I suppose, is whether a leadership style that stresses humility can be adopted by those who are used to getting their own way. It is not easy to come to work on the bus or to consult the cleaner when your job comes with a 24-hour chauffeur and an army of professional advisers.

I am not suggesting that bosses should wash their employees' feet in the manner of the monarch's traditional act on Maundy Thursday. Real humility is more than a gesture; I think it has to come from the genuine belief that serving others matters more than serving ourselves.