Leadership: the hidden dangers

Derek Dean discusses the personal implications for those who find themselves in a leadership position and suggests strategies to avert some of the problems.

Irrespective of the reasons for assuming a leadership role, the responsibility will have a significant impact on everyday life, sometimes beneficial and sometimes detrimental.

The positive effects of occupying a leadership position are easy to see. Nothing breeds success like success, which in turn gives rise to increased enthusiasm and contentment. Others may experience the energy, pride and satisfaction and most will derive pleasure from their contribution to success, with a consequent increase in motivation. The success may be accompanied by public acclaim such as awards, publications and recognition within the organisation.

Exercising leadership involves more than accepting additional responsibility at work. Leaders seek responsibility for a number of reasons:

- A sense of vocation: in healthcare this means, the desire to influence others to provide high standards of service which will relieve suffering and promote the welfare of fellow human beings.
- A desire to make a real difference: the realisation that unless someone takes responsibility for changing the status quo, conditions will remain unaltered.
- Recognition of potential in oneself. As a result of education or experience an awareness of abilities and their possible application may emerge.
- Requests by others. Ability and potential are not always self-evident, hence many who occupy leadership roles can point to others who have been instrumental in raising their awareness.
- Ambition which results in pursuing a position of power and authority in order to have influence. Having arrived at this position the individual's leadership skills emerge.

The leader faces challenges which may be the source of considerable intellectual stimulation and broadening of experience. These challenges may place the leader at the forefront of innovation and professional development, giving rise to a high degree of satisfaction. The leader's family and friends may attach great importance to their success. Family relationships may be strengthened and seemingly everyone derives pleasure from the leader's efforts. Although the leader may not seek it, publicity may bring recognition adding to a sense of worth and fulfilment.

In short, a leadership role may increase motivation, bring recognition from colleagues, friends and family and even improve the quality of family life. Because of their supportive relationships, some leaders can absorb a greater workload and commitment without any adverse affects.

The downside of leadership is less evident than its benefits, at least to colleagues who may be blissfully unaware of the difficulties that their leader is encountering. Having either sought or been encouraged to assume the leadership mantle, some leaders can absorb a greater workload and commitment without any adverse affects.

Most colleagues share in the pleasure and achievement of their leader but not everyone will be as enthusiastic or as generous with their acclaim. Jealousy from those who aspire to the same degree of recognition, whether or not they have the ability or opportunity, can be disruptive and detrimental to overall achievement.

Because leaders are highly motivated they will invariably commit themselves to more work than they can reasonably cope with. This can result in long hours which crowd out other important activities. Leadership commitments can distort the priority-setting process of individuals: unchecked, this can lead to a downward spiral of negative events.

A large workload may leave inadequate time to foster relationships. Leaders can be lonely people who compensate for their loneliness by immersing themselves still further in their work. Their interests are dropped because time does not allow pursuance of 'frivolous' activity which in turn reduces their contacts and increases their isolation.

Few people are able to organise their working lives so that they spread the pressures equally across 40 or 50 years. Many of us choose a partner during the first half of our careers and decide to raise our children shortly after. This also coincides with the most intensive period of career advancement and further study.

In these circumstances, it is perhaps no wonder that concern for other issues such as a healthy lifestyle take a back seat.

It is noticeable that many women who hold leadership positions marry either after or late on in their careers. Whereas men expect to be able to combine leadership with marriage on the assumption that their partner will take the largest slice of responsibility for family matters. Women who know they will have to devote a disproportionate part of their time to home and childrearing face a dilemma, but one which is now being addressed more openly.

Most people obtain their formal educat-
tation even before their career or leadership role begins. Many would like to have put some educational time 'in the bank' to be used at a later date. Few are fortunate enough to be able to look forward to regular spells of sabbatical leave. As careers develop and leadership activity intensifies it becomes more and more difficult to attend to personal development other than that acquired through the interactive process during working time. It may be difficult to keep pace with existing workload without further increasing the pressure to breaking point.

**COPING STRATEGIES**

**Preparation**
Before taking on new responsibilities it is wise to make arrangements or negotiate the opportunity to acquire any additional knowledge or skills you may need.

**Jealousy**
Be on the lookout for anyone who finds it difficult to acknowledge or share in the celebration of success. The reason for this must be understood and rectified. The objective must be to enlist support and at the same time enable the individual to contribute. The need to develop successors also provides an opportunity to share work.

**Workload**
Assess the implications of taking on additional work even though the work may be relevant to your objectives. If the burden will mean sacrificing other essential activities, then either share the existing activity, or drop or refuse the work. Refusing a request may be difficult but explaining why will invariably be met with understanding.

**Thinking time**
A busy workplace is not always the best environment for uninterrupted thought – which can be stressful if issues require indepth consideration. A period spent at home, in a library or somewhere else where you cannot be disturbed may allow you to use the time available more efficiently.

**External relationships**
It is easy for enthusiasm for work to crowd out other activities. It may be necessary or wise to reduce hobbies and pastimes but it is important to retain at least one other interest which will provide distraction and a wider circle of contacts.

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**Excerpt from an article by Derek Dean**

Derek Dean: The disadvantages of leadership can be minimised with proper planning.

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**Personal health**
For most people everything seems more important than a healthy lifestyle when the pace is really hectic. You may feel that time spent eating breakfast or a proper lunch is time which could be used to attend a meeting or answer correspondence. The wise leader will eat sensibly, take sufficient rest, recreation, and a take some exercise. For guaranteed rest and recreation, plan your diary before the year begins. It is much easier to avoid appointments in scheduled holiday periods than to try and fit holidays in a crowded diary.

**Family life**
Combining a leadership role with family life is possible through the development of a partnership in which responsibilities are shared. The time and attention demanded and needed by babies and small children, for instance, is frequently underestimated. Whatever the circumstances, addressing problems openly with a partner will make acceptable compromises much easier.

**Personal finance**
Those who are committed to making a difference are often not prepared to bargain enough for their own needs. Negotiating a package which includes salary and conditions of service must be taken seriously on two counts. First, worries around finance will be a further cause of stress especially in the settling down period. Second, everyone is entitled to a fair rate for the job. Be prepared to stand up for what is reasonable, especially while a new position is on offer. If the new organisation wants your services it should not expect something for less than a fair settlement. If it does, then tell them to look elsewhere for their leader – if you don't value yourself who will?

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**Obsession**
Understanding or resolving specific problems can become intriguing to the extent that it crowds out concern for other challenges. To a degree this allows concentrated attention to address an issue thoroughly, but to maintain momentum it is essential that this obsession does not become a limitation on overall achievement.

**Personal development**
Formal education is not an easy option for the leader but it should be considered, especially today when there is such an abundance of programmes which are directly related to specific spheres of work. If a course can be identified which has a direct bearing on the particular interest then it may act as a refreshing diversion and a real aid to the task in hand.

Another approach is to combine recreation with development in a 'learning-set' with other like-minded people, perhaps meeting on a regular basis for a day at a time. Generally, for this to be successful it is undertaken in one's own time with confidentiality guaranteed. Those involved do not necessarily have to be in the same line of business, but there is usually some common thread such as all having participated in the same training course. For those unable to find or create a learning-set an alternative might be to identify one person as a counsellor to provide support and a sounding-board for ideas.

Leadership roles have a number of visible benefits but even more disadvantages, albeit less visible. If anticipated these disadvantages can be minimised to a large extent by thought, planning and positive action. Although perhaps a statement of the obvious, many leaders and many of those who urge them on seem oblivious to the hidden dangers. The glory is emphasised and the disadvantages played down or ignored.

Though stretched for time, leaders must, above all else, manage time as effectively and efficiently as possible. This will not happen by chance. Failure to heed this warning may result in difficulties from the least expected direction.

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