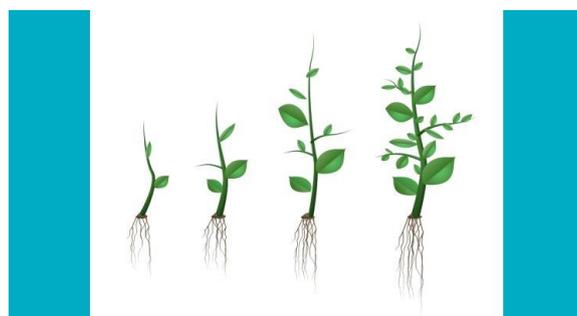




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## The Accidental Manager



### Summary

#### **The Accidental Manager**

#### **Leadership over experience**

#### **What is great leadership?**

#### **Skill, intention, and authenticity**

The departure of KPMG's former Chairman Bill Michael, after reportedly making unsympathetic remarks to his teams about their responses to the pandemic, brought into the foreground some longstanding questions about management styles.

In a recent Financial Times article, leadership authors Gareth Jones (who sadly died recently) and Rob Goffey, are quoted as having often put to managers the question '*Why would anyone want to be led by you?*' Most managers were stumped for an answer, reported Jones and Goffey, a reaction that is hardly surprising, given the number of workers who are promoted to management after having performed well with an entirely different set of skills. There is no reason to suppose that those who are the best sales people, for instance, therefore also naturally excel at managing the sales team, but leading people is the essence of what a manager has to do.

### Leadership over experience

I am reminded of the early business culture at Virgin, my first leadership role, when Sir Richard Branson tended to appoint people to management positions because he felt they would be right for the job – experience was rarely a consideration. Branson held the view that people who had done a particular job before, might be limited to doing just what they had always done, and in the way they had always done it. Virgin was far too innovative as an organisation to entertain that possibility.

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That recruitment policy worked exceptionally well at Virgin, helped by Branson who role-modelled exceptionally effective leadership skills, which we were able to absorb by the kind of osmosis that happens between managers and the people they lead – for better or worse.

## What is great leadership?

Jones and Goffey's enlightening question also brings to mind an exercise I learned from someone else I worked closely with, the late coaching pioneer Sir John Whitmore, which can help to clarify in people's minds what good leadership really means.

We ask people to think of the best leadership they ever experienced, perhaps a boss, family member or mentor – someone who inspired and helped them to grow. What specifically did that leader do to earn that accolade?

Through 33 different countries and corporate cultures over the last 20 years, the answers are so very close to being identical that we are able to put them on a slide, flashed up to everyone's astonishment after they have finished recounting their own lists, which have usually involved the exact, or paraphrased same words!

The great leader (people say, as does our slide):

- Listened to me
- Believed in me
- Challenged me
- Trusted and respected me
- Gave me time and attention
- Treated me as an equal

So what does it take to be this kind of leader? Who can listen, believe in people, give their time and attention, show humility and respect? Why, anyone can!

The secret to great leadership does not, apparently, lie in charisma, confidence, superior knowledge, or great skill. It is about what you do, not what you are. To take that thought a step further, perhaps what you is what you are, and if you change what you do, does that eventually change what you are?

Most importantly, please notice that all of the qualities that people list are about what the leader did for *them*, not about what the leader was like in terms of the leader's own work, the leader's specific work related skills, or even as a person..

## Skill, intention, and authenticity

The key to great leadership lies partly in authenticity – being yourself instead of emulating someone else's style. But it isn't as simple as that; many leaders who come under the category of 'accidental managers' fail because they have never experienced role models like Branson to show them the skills that we list on our slide. I can confidently state, after delivering 20 years of listening exercises, that most people's idea of listening stops at interrupting, hi-jacking the conversation, or giving advice. So, though managers may set out with good intentions about inspiring their teams, they simply don't know how to put those intentions into practice.

As Jones and Goffey put it, '*Authenticity means 'being yourself with more skill'*'. I would add to that the importance of intention – if your intention is not to support people, empathise with them, and

help them to grow, then it really doesn't matter how authentic you are, or what skills you learn – it is unlikely that anyone will ever think of you in terms of being a great leader, and you had best find something else to do in your career that does not involve managing people.

I think this is one of the reasons that coaching skills training has become the 'must-have' for most organisations over the last 20 years, and why it underpins most other forms of leadership development. The intention to be a great leader, and an understanding of what great leadership means, is not enough – given the practical skills, the 'accidental manager' will become known and regarded for their inspirational effect and popularity, no matter how many sales targets they may have met in a previous role.

## References

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### About the author



International speaker, writer and broadcaster Carol Wilson is CEO of Culture at Work, a Fellow of the Institute of Leadership & Management and the Association for Coaching, and former Head of Professional Standards & Excellence at the Association for Coaching. A cross-cultural expert, she designs and delivers programmes to create coaching cultures for corporate and public sector organisations worldwide and has won awards for coaching and writing. She is the author of '*Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to Best Practice Coaching and Training*', now in its third edition and featuring Forewords by Sir Richard Branson and Sir John Whitmore, and '*The Work and Life of David Grove: Clean Language and Emergent Knowledge*'. She has contributed to several other books and published over 70 articles including a monthly column in Training Journal.