

or many, “leadership” conjures a caricature of Winston Churchill: a clearly identifiable chief, with an assigned position at the head of an established structure, handling a crisis from the frontline using personal authority and rhetorical skill. Fifty years after his death, however, while such a power-based, top-down approach is frequently evoked to describe the exploits of everyone from successful chief executives to winning football managers, a far more nuanced style of leadership is evolving.

I asked a group of senior leaders – men and women who hold or have held senior positions in the military, business, science, academia and the arts – and a group of “next generation” leaders in their early twenties, what “leadership” meant to them.

Increasingly, they suggest, influence trumps power and position, networks trump hierarchies, and intelligence trumps force.

All leaders are already working in this less structured world. General Sir Richard Barrons, one of the most senior officers in the British military, says the idea of soldiers as “hierarchical automatons” was always a myth. In reality, he says, “people who join the military haven’t come from space; they’ve come from the society that we’re all part of, and to which they will return”. But these days success is measured not only in narrow battlefield terms but in an ability to “broker relationships with people and organisations that aren’t under my command”.

Sir Jeremy Greenstock, former UK ambassador to the United Nations and chairman of geopolitical advisory group Gatehouse Advisory Partners, says leadership is now less “apex-shaped” and more “circular”. Leaders must find a balance “between leading and listening, between top-down and bottom-up, between short-term and long-term”.

People now have to lead “by persuasion rather than by coercion”, says Dame Athene Donald, a physicist who is master of Churchill College, Cambridge, and president of the British Science Association. She links the development to the rise of more women to leadership roles. “Being the oldest, longest-serving or next in line won’t cut it any longer,” adds Harriet Green, former chief executive of travel group Thomas Cook, who was recently appointed to head two divisions of IBM.

Certain fundamental – even Churchillian – leadership qualities remain the same. “Seeing where you fit in the broader context” is still important, says Dame Julia Slingso, chief scientist at the UK’s Met Office. Communicating a clear vision effectively is vital, as is integrity.

But organisations are also starting to develop the more collaborative approach that Sir Nicholas Kenyon, managing director of the Barbican arts centre, calls “responsive leadership”, which “listens to the audience, senses their potential [appetite] for new things that you might offer them”.

SONKE HEE

Age 25
Hee is studying for a PhD in cosmology at Churchill College, Cambridge, having done his undergraduate degree in theoretical physics at Imperial College London. While at Cambridge, he has organised student conferences and created an online site for student talks. He is president of the college’s postgraduate student committee.



Leadership means bringing the best out of the team. I consider myself to be fairly competent but within my team of 22 other postgraduates, half will be more creative than me; half better at creating events; half more in tune with what the rest of the students want from the college.

My role as president of this committee is to take all their ideas, combine them in a way that’s cohesive and define the direction. It’s incredibly important for the leader to be able to keep a big picture because no one else in the group will have the time or the dedicated role to do that. Adaptability is very important, especially in the modern environment where things change rapidly. You can’t implement the change you want if you’re not adaptable.

Personal feedback is something that’s maturing. There will be a mechanism to database all the performance of your team members, and that will provide a more effective way of gaining an overview of your team and will turn it towards more of a meritocracy.

LAWRENCE BAKER

Age 23
A consultant mechanical engineer, who graduated from Cambridge University’s Institute for Manufacturing and now works for The Technology Partnership, developing novel medical devices. He is also a member of the Effective Altruism movement, which examines where individuals can make the greatest social impact.



Leadership is not “go and do this” and it’s not “we’re going to make £100,000 of profit this year”. It’s “I want to be the best product company in the world” or “I want to do the most good in the world that I can do”.

My company isn’t very structured: 95 per cent of people just have the rank of consultant so it’s a very flat company and anyone is free to suggest things and take things forward, which I quite like. I think there’ll be more organisations like that – less hierarchical because simple tasks will probably end up being automated so there will be a shift towards knowledge work. You may end up with a much more networked system or with a distributed network, still powered by this idea of a vision.

As for Churchill, as a wartime leader he was great but I’m not sure I’d like to work in a company run by him.

EMMA PENCHEON

Age 22
A clinical medical student at University College London, who previously studied medical sciences at Oxford and has a keen interest in public health. She is also part of the 16-strong national committee of Medsin, a UK grassroots network for global health, where she is director of communications.



If any organisation can function with a pretty flat hierarchy, that’s ideal. In hospital, it’s interesting seeing the different kinds of leadership: some slightly old-school consultants who would look down on the nurses but then, equally, some fantastic nurses who basically run the entire ward without ever seeming to be dictating.

At Medsin, it’s not a select group of us presiding over everyone else and saying, “You should do this, you should do that.” The aim and the ethos of that organisation is very much that we’re bringing together every student who shares that common interest, and we’re saying to them, “What can we do that will help you achieve what you want to achieve?”

We need to make sure the structure of working doesn’t penalise women. I feel there will potentially be a bit of a choice between, “Do I want to be a professor, a consultant, or do I want to have children?” That shouldn’t be a concern.

CECILIA DIEMONT

Age 23
Works for Human Rights Watch in Amsterdam. She just completed an MA in international peace and security at King’s College London. While at Leiden University College, Diemont founded a current affairs society that invited speakers such as ambassadors, politicians, academics and journalists to “connect the academic side with reality”.



We’re living in a world with big, global, complex problems we can no longer solve by ourselves. Co-operation is needed and it’s very important to understand each others’ perspectives. Without understanding, world leaders will look at the unknown as a threat.

Leaders are not necessarily going to come from big, well-known institutions or similar backgrounds. Everyday people have the opportunity to be leaders if they dare to come up with initiatives and really follow through.

Leaders are going to have to continuously justify their own position as well as all of their policies. They’re not just going to be saying, “OK, I’m here for four years because I’ve been given that position and I can do whatever I want.” There’s going to be much more push for transparency and for accountability.

People now have to lead “by persuasion rather than by coercion”

Dame Athene Donald



JANAY GIBBONS

Age 24
Final-year PhD student, studying effects of obesity on type 2 diabetes at Anglia Ruskin University. She is also a member of the university’s BSc biomedical science teaching staff. Gibbons is an officer cadet in the Officers’ Training Corps and wants to join the army as a medical officer.



It takes someone to step up and to be a leader and make the change that they want to see – in my case, to take education from scientists to the general population to inform lifestyle choices.

It’s about someone taking something they believe in and, regardless of their title, just spreading the word and leading on what they believe in. It’s very much about “microleadership”.

Instead of being a politician and saying, “Right, let’s do this” in a very harsh manner, it’s about people with the knowledge using that in as personable a way as possible and getting the information out there.

There are only so many huge companies that need to be led, there are only so many governments that need to be run, but there’s more space, with advancing technology, for everyone to take hold of something and run with it.

It’s not that we have a lack of leaders but, perhaps, a lack of leaders who are willing to admit mistakes, see the error of their ways, and change.

FATIMA ISLAM

Age 25
Studying for a master’s in war and psychiatry at King’s College, London. She is a company under officer with University of London’s Officers’ Training Corps.



Whether you do it intentionally or unintentionally, you’re a role model to those whom you’re leading.

Within the military you’re going to be making decisions that could potentially impact people’s lives very greatly so you genuinely need to care about the people following you. As long as the people following you see you have their genuine rights or interests at heart, that’s the sign of a good leader.

In the past, people who were a little bit quieter but had the qualities of a good leader were maybe overshadowed. Now, factors such as the expansion of social media have brought out people who may not necessarily have had a platform to be a leader.

The best leaders are the ones that don’t necessarily talk about how great they are. They let their actions speak for themselves. You’ll see a lot of so-called leaders who, to big themselves up, will always talk about themselves but in the process constantly put other people down.



Watch young leaders discuss the impact of social media, job titles and networks
ft.com/leader

TOLA JAMES

Age 24
Entrepreneur and chief executive of start-up Nari Juice. Tola is a business graduate who is about to launch healthy drinks based on coconut palm juice. He is also co-founder of GoGetters Global, linking entrepreneurs and investors to opportunities in sub-Saharan Africa.



If I stop today, nothing’s getting done. It’s my vision that’s allowing Nari Juice to come to fruition. And if you want to try and break into the beverage industry, you need a lot of money. So I’m leading it in the aspect of raising finance and getting the people and resources in one place to create a finished product.

Looking at the competition, there was no such thing as palm juice mixed with anything else. So I think, in leadership, innovation is important. And we have innovated.

It’s not easy to find a commercial volume of palm juice. It actually took me two years to find. Leadership is also about persistence.

In the business sense, the title of chief executive is important. So whoever you do business with knows who they’re talking to, of course. But I try not to allow that name to make me pompous.

The next generation has the ambition – and the tools – to accelerate these changes. They want to work in organisations that have a far flatter structure, in which leaders “genuinely care about the people who are following” them, according to Fatima Islam, who is studying war and psychiatry at King’s College, London, and already leads 200 cadets in the university’s Officers’ Training Corps.

Members of the next generation say they will expect leaders to be more transparent, to offer clearer feedback, and to be able to justify their decisions to their followers. Titles will count for less; influence over wider networks of people for more. All of the next generation are potential leaders professionally but many are already leading in voluntary groups or social movements. Some of the challenges facing future leaders – and how to meet them – are laid out in a series of reports that were launched this week by the Churchill 2015 global leaders programme.

Clearly at some point the ambition and idealism of the next generation of leaders will meet the complex realities of a world still tarnished by leadership failures, among Wall Street and City banks, at scandal-hit Volkswagen, or in Syria and the Middle East. It is not impossible that at some point a crisis leader on the more traditional model of a Churchill will be needed again.

For all the younger generation’s optimism, hierarchies and power structures have a habit of reasserting themselves, even in quite loosely constituted organisations. I have encountered – though not in this group – young leaders who are reluctant to take on positions of power, even when it seems clear that a more assertive style is what is needed. Finally, and most depressingly, there is the possibility that the sheer inertia of existing leadership models and the inevitable accumulation of ties and responsibilities will swamp their aspirations.

But since the senior leaders I interviewed all made clear they had to lead differently from how their predecessors led, it seems likely that the next 10 or 20 years will see even greater transformation. As Lawrence Baker, who works at a consultancy developing novel medical devices, puts it: “It’s about, ‘This is what this place might look like – how should we get there?’” **FT**

Andrew Hill is the FT’s management editor. The “next generation” are all Churchill Leadership Fellows. The programme was developed by the Møller Centre for Continuing Education, Churchill College, Cambridge, and Learn to Lead