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READ LEADERSHIP BOOKS. BECOME A LEADER.

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When Apple co-founder Steve Jobs died in October, there was a tremendous outpouring of grief from millions of people around the world. It was all the more remarkable that they were celebrating and paying tribute to the life of someone who was neither a humanitarian nor a revered statesman.

Though Jobs was arguably the most popular chief executive in contemporary history, he was as deeply flawed as he was a highly effective leader. There was certainly a nasty and mercurial side to Jobs. After all, he was known to be a rather "high-maintenance" co-worker who would label those who did not impress him as "bozos".

But despite his failings, the college dropout, who was an obsessive perfectionist, led Apple to briefly surpass oil major Exxon Mobil as the world's most valuable listed company in August 2011.

You don't need to be perfect

The lesson here is that no one needs to be perfect to be an effective leader. But they do have to fit the situation or find a context in which they can use their strengths to flourish, says author and former management consultant Jo Owen in the third edition of his book, [How to Lead](#).

For instance, former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had to endure what he called his "wilderness years" in peacetime before succeeding in his role as an inspirational wartime leader against Nazi Germany.

"Leaders are creatures of context," says Owen. "If you look at leaders today, very few succeed across sectors. The great CEO is a one-trick pony."

The right context

Indeed, the right context – among the three elements of the leadership journey – means finding a match between one’s signature strengths and the strengths that different organisations require from their leaders. Knowing an organisation’s rules for survival and success is crucial.

Although organisations all talk about teamwork, initiative and results, “the words and emphasis mean different things”.

To be sure, the book is full of such useful and practical advice on leadership. The prose is simple, to the point, and thankfully free of management jargon.

The book’s premise is that leadership does not have to be for the select few, but that anyone can learn to lead. And with practice and guidance, we can all strive to be the best version of ourselves, the author says.

No secret recipe for leadership

For that matter, he found that there was and is no “elusive pixie dust” to turn people into good leaders despite having interviewed thousands of people and spending three decades working with more than a hundred organisations.

However, the good news is that successful leaders can and do come with different styles and formulas. Furthermore, people can lead and make a difference at nearly all the corporate levels.

“Leadership is about performance, not position. If you take people where they would not have gone by themselves, you’re leading,” says Owen.

Another key characteristic of leadership is the desire to keep learning and adapting to change. It is important to do so because the rules of survival and success change at every level of an organisation. That means that one’s recipe for success at one level may lead to failure at the next as expectations change.

In addition, the leadership journey does not have to be “a random walk” or a snakes-and-ladders game, where one’s fortunes rise and fall depending on the kind of circumstances and bosses one gets.

“Luck is not a strategy and hope is not a method,” says Owen, but people can learn consistent sets of behaviours and skills that leaders tend to have.

“They do not guarantee that anyone will become a leader or that they will become a heroic success as a leader. But they will load the dice heavily in favour of success.

“You do not have to wait to get the top job before you can demonstrate that you’re a leader. In fact, you cannot afford to wait that long. Leaders practice and demonstrate their skills from a very early stage.”

Important behaviours

Part of effective leadership is cultivating behaviours – focusing on people, being positive, and being professional – that are central to the foundation, the practice and the mastering of leadership.

For instance, learning the art of persuasion is part of what it takes to become a leader. For this, Owen has a ten-point plan:

1. Prepare a plan for what you want to achieve and know what your target wants, how they work, and who makes the decisions
2. Build rapport and trust before finding common ground on the issue.
3. Adapt your style to the other person and don't allow different styles of working to divide you.
4. Listen to the other party twice as much as you talk.
5. View the issue or challenge from their perspective. Suggest your idea by putting it in terms of their view and make it feel like it's their idea.
6. Show or tell them what the prize is for overcoming a challenge. The bigger the prize, the more likely they will tackle the obstacles to help.
7. Suggest the idea and tell a story which shows how it works.
8. Give them a story or a victory, which they can tell others to show they have made a good decision.
9. Don't fight their objections, but agree with them, validate them and then seek to overcome the problem together.
10. Summarise what the next steps are and gain their confirmation.

This clear and direct lesson illustrates the straight-talking and pragmatic approach that Owen has taken in the book.

While *How to Lead* does not necessarily make for light reading, it is a useful guide that provides a framework for how one might cultivate their leadership qualities.

"You cannot succeed by trying to be someone else," says Owen.

Equally, coasting along as yourself and hoping that the world will recognize your innate excellence will not work either.

"To succeed as a leader, you have to be the best of who you are."

In a world full of hype-driven management books, this one certainly stands out for its down-to-earth, commonsensical advice.