

Old dogs and new tricks

Leadership training is letting its hair down. By Sorrel Downer



According to a survey conducted by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in 2005, two-thirds of UK organisations are short of dynamic, effective and inspirational leaders. Some 85 per cent of UK companies already invest in some form of leadership development activity, but to meet the need for managers with better planning, innovation and people skills, training budgets (currently the lowest per capita in Europe) are going up and firms are turning to independent management coaches with creative approaches to unlocking leadership potential.

Unorthodox methods have yielded positive results, as clients such as British Airways, British Telecom, BP, Microsoft and the major banks will all testify. Thus

Guiding a blindfold driver presents a leadership challenge

high-flying leaders of tomorrow are these days more likely to be found conducting a string quartet, driving blindfolded, or herding sheep in the Yorkshire Dales than dozing through

a PowerPoint presentation.

The Cabinet Office, the NHS and the Metropolitan Police have all honed leadership skills with the help of Shakespeare. Americans love the Bard too, often citing King Lear as having poor real estate investment strategy. So Richard (son of Laurence) Olivier, of Olivier Mythodrama, shows how Henry V rallied his troops, Macbeth rejected his allies once he was in power and Richard III had a bit to learn about ethics. He also weaves in 'The Art of Presentation' or 'The Leader as Facilitator' and arrives at 'Transformational Mythodrama', designed to transform leadership for the 21st century (tights not required).

Coaching is rife with metaphors, and the world of music provides one for today's business climate, according to Music & Management, which gets teams working with live jazz bands to learn about collaboration, flexibility and embracing uncertainty, and conducting orchestras to get a feel for 'creating frameworks for exceptional performance'. For managers who need to loosen up, there's a session of African drumming, in which they'll sit in a circle with djembe drums and learn call-and-response patterns and team up to play interlocking rhythms.

There's a strong link between sport and business. In addition to the themes that reoccur in, for example, golf and business courses (dynamic principles, personal success versus company effectiveness, fresh air), there's 'blindfold driving', advocated by the Teambuilding Company, which presents something of a leadership challenge. Participants inspect the course, plan a route, put the team in the back of a 4x4 and drive off blindfolded, guided by backseat drivers banned from using words like 'left' and 'right'. Success is dependent on anticipation, trust, communication, and flukey good luck, much like most business ventures.

Circus at Work also subscribes to the notion that danger brings out the leader in everyone, and shows this by having executives balance on high wires and form human pyramids.

Companies hoping to introduce a more relaxed leadership style can invest in the future well-being of their management by turning to Nature's Rhythms and its energy medicine, yoga, t'ai chi and meditation workshops. This may seem an unorthodox element of leadership training but, given the productivity lost through stress-related illness, teaching your most valued staff how to manage stress before putting them under it is now recognised as a sensible move. ☑