

Debra Allcock Tyler

2nd edition

# IT'S TOUGH AT THE TOP

The No-fibbing Guide to Leadership



dsc

directory of social change

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# Acknowledgements

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## **Dedication**

For the staff and trustees at DSC – for making it less tough  
than it could be.



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# About the Directory of Social Change

The Directory of Social Change (DSC) has a vision of an independent voluntary sector at the heart of social change. The activities of independent charities, voluntary organisations and community groups are fundamental to achieve social change. We exist to help these organisations and the people who support them to achieve their goals.

We do this by:

- providing practical tools that organisations and activists need, including online and printed publications, training courses, and conferences on a huge range of topics;
- acting as a ‘concerned citizen’ in public policy debates, often on behalf of smaller charities, voluntary organisations and community groups;
- leading campaigns and stimulating debate on key policy issues that affect those groups;
- carrying out research and providing information to influence policymakers.

DSC is the leading provider of information and training for the voluntary sector and publishes an extensive range of guides and handbooks covering subjects such as fundraising, management, communication, finance and law. We have a range of subscription-based websites containing a wealth of information on funding from grant-making charities, companies and government sources. We run more than 300 training courses each year, including bespoke in-house training provided at the client’s location. DSC conferences, many of which run on an annual basis, include Management Fair, the Charity Accountants’ Conference and the Charity Law Conference. DSC’s major annual event is Charityfair, which provides low-cost training on a wide variety of subjects.

For details of all our activities, and to order publications and book courses, go to [www.dsc.org.uk](http://www.dsc.org.uk), call 08450 777707 or email [publications@dsc.org.uk](mailto:publications@dsc.org.uk).

# About the author

Debra has been the Chief Executive of the Directory of Social Change (DSC) since 2001. She is currently a Trustee of In Kind Direct, a Patron of the Charity Staff Foundation and Vice-Chair of Governors of Whiteknights Primary School. She was a member of the Charity Commission's SORP Committee and is a Fellow of the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (FRSA). She is also a member of the Royal Institution and Liberty. She was the founder Chair of the Small Charities Coalition.

After a brief stint in the private sector Debra has spent most of her career in the charitable sector, carrying out a range of roles at all levels, including campaigning, policy development, sales, product development, media relations and training. She spent some 14 years as a voluntary Trade Union Officer, a year working with Youth at Risk – an organisation that works to rehabilitate young people who suffer severe social disadvantages – and was the first female Programme Director of the Runge Effective Leadership programme.

Debra is an internationally published author of several books. She has spent many years working with the media, doing TV, radio, newspaper, magazine and internet features and interviews. She is a regular columnist for *Third Sector* magazine. She delivers around 50 keynote speeches every year to the voluntary, private and public sectors on topics ranging from the relationship between the state and charities to leadership and governance, and topical issues affecting the voluntary sector.



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# Foreword

In all the sectors effective leadership matters, but especially so in the voluntary and charitable sector. When we get it wrong it's those people we are set up to serve who suffer. This is why leadership at very senior levels can be both rewarding and terrifying all at the same time, especially when you're just starting out. But really effective leadership can change the world and people's lives for the better. The NSPCC would not be as powerful a force for good in the lives of children without the ability and achievements of a succession of committed, creative and passionate chief executives creating an atmosphere where purposeful, wonderful and willing staff and volunteers focus together on how we can best improve the lives of our nation's children.

So it matters that we get it right. Of course most of us end up learning on the job, the hard way. But knowing you're not alone helps. This book is a bit like a 'pocket' mentor. You can hear Debra's voice in your ear guiding and advising with practical, sensible, no-bull\*\*\*\* advice. The book is littered with real-life examples of things going wrong as well as right, shared with a light and humorous touch which makes the whole business of top-level leadership seem much less tough than it sometimes feels. Go into many offices of CEOs in our sector and you will find well-thumbed copies close at hand. Its ideas have got many of us over rough ground more lightly. Perhaps it should be retitled 'In Case of Emergency Open Here'!

Enjoy the read. Apply the advice. And good luck on your leadership journey.

**Peter Wanless**  
**Chief Executive, NSPCC**  
**Former Chief Executive, Big Lottery Fund**



# Introduction

***People have more need for models than critics.***

Attributed to Scott Simmerman, US management consultant

In the ten years since this book was published an enormous amount has changed in our sector and in our society. We've seen a change of government, the collapse of the banking system, a global economic crisis, a refugee and migrant crisis, a resurgence of terrorism and a couple of royal babies. But all of this upheaval has simply reinforced for me that the fundamental principles of leadership don't change regardless of the circumstances.

So the core messages in this book are largely the same. I've updated some of my stories and examples, refreshed some language but it is still filled with other people's ideas and solutions which I have 'borrowed' so I can share them with you.

The content of this book is still largely drawn from some of the most common issues and experiences in leadership that I have come across not only in my own personal experience but also working with other chief execs and senior staff in the sector. Most of my advice, hints and tips, ideas and experiences have been shared with me by hundreds of chief execs and their top teams over a number of years. The book still focuses on the more 'human' side of leadership – that is the relationships and structures that help us to persuade folk to follow us and our cause.

As always, when you read this book there will be things that you don't agree with or that don't square with your own experience. Give some of the ideas a try anyhow, and if they don't work, try something else. Working with voluntary sector organisations and their leaders has shown me that the model required depends on so many different factors – the size of the organisation, its age, its revenue, its cause and so on. And, of course, it is highly dependent on the personality, value set and background of you – the person leading the organisation. Think of leadership as a toolkit, full of different models, ideas and approaches, and take from the toolkit the tool that fits the situation you are currently in. When that situation changes, or if that particular tool didn't work, well, then you try another one.

For those of you who are already very experienced many of the ideas here may simply serve as a reminder of what you already know; for those of you who are new they may be things that you haven't tried yet. Either way leadership isn't static, situations and environments change so the tools you choose will also change, even though the fundamental principles don't.

If you're doing the job well you will probably find that you worry a lot about how you're doing! Good. Constantly thinking you could do better or try

a different way is a great indication of how engaged you are in your leadership journey.

When sometimes I feel very unsure about why I am working in the charitable sector at all – or when I wonder if it's really worth the inevitable stress that comes with leading in the voluntary sector – the following quotes keep me going because they remind me of why it's worth it.

This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. ...

I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as I live it is my privilege – my *privilege* to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I love. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle for me; it is a sort of splendid torch which I've got a hold of for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.

George Bernard Shaw, Irish playwright

This next quote is the one I read during the times I feel most beleaguered; when my confidence is low, when I am wondering if we are making the right decisions at the right time, or when it really does feel as though I am swimming upstream and the tide against me is the rest of the world! (I know that some of you reading this sometimes have those feelings too – and that I am not alone in this.)

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

Theodore Roosevelt, speech at the Sorbonne, Paris

Good luck!

# 1 What they don't tell you

*Upon his royal face there is no note  
How dread an army hath enrounded him.*  
William Shakespeare, *Henry V*

## Outcomes

After reading this chapter you will:

- Understand the realities of an apparently powerful job title
- Have a sense of the behaviours you are likely to encounter
- Realise the importance of critical mass

The chances are that by the time you read this book you are already at the top or near the top of your organisation. So I'm not going to waste any time asking you whether you are sure you are ready for the challenge! But what I will say is that I believe that leadership is a vocation, not a profession.

You have probably now begun to realise that leadership is a choice you make about how to behave. The job title, 'director' or 'chief executive', does not confer automatic leadership power on you. All it gives you is a certain level of authority, but authority is not leadership. You have to make a conscious choice to engage in the leadership thinking and behaviour that turns a job title into a leadership role.

## The job title is a burden more than a blessing

As soon as you gain a job title that implies status and prestige, there will be a number of people, both within and outside your organisation, who will perceive you only through the 'fog' of that job title. They will attribute to you motives that have nothing to do with who you are as a human being, and everything to do with how they perceive senior people.

I attended a do at the House of Commons several years ago. (Dos at the House of Commons are commonplace in the sector! You end up going to an awful lot of them.) I was in conversation with someone when a very senior and well-known chief executive of a large national charity came over. He clearly wanted to speak to the person who I was talking to and so simply cut in and completely ignored me. I wasn't particularly offended because this frequently happens when you are a woman leader in what is still essentially a man's world (being short and blonde doesn't help either!) and so you tend to ignore it.

Anyhow, my colleague was embarrassed by this and introduced me to this man by name and said that I worked for the Directory of Social Change (DSC).

He didn't recognise my name (and frankly why should he?). Looking rather irritated at having to speak to me rather than my colleague, he asked me 'Are you helping out here today?' He was clearly under the impression that I was part of the administration team. I didn't mind that either, my career began with administrative roles and I think they are massively important and underrated. So, still not being offended, I replied 'No'. To be honest, he didn't give the impression that he really wanted to talk to me so I didn't feel encouraged to open up.

My colleague then told him my job title. 'Debra is the Chief Executive.' You would be amazed at the change in his demeanour then. Suddenly I was someone of importance because I had this job title. Immediately his eyes lit up and his body language changed from dismissive to attentive. That was when I did begin to feel offended. The only thing that had influenced his desire to engage in conversation with me was when he thought of me as somebody important. As an administrator I wasn't worth the time and effort of conversation, as a chief executive I was.

This happens internally too. When I took on the leadership role at DSC my then PA, Jill Thornton, was someone who I worked alongside in a different capacity many years ago. So she knew me quite well and has seen me develop and grow over the years. When she became my PA at DSC, one of the first things she observed was that the staff found it almost impossible to see past my job title and that the person they were describing to her was not someone she recognised from her own experience.

So people will have a perception of you that is first of all based on your job title. And that perception will be highly influenced by their experiences of senior people in the past and their expectations of how you should or should not behave or act. Good leaders recognise this and take it into account when dealing with others.

### **You work with adults, not children: allow them to shine**

One of the things I find both frustrating and amusing when observing leaders in action is how easy it is for them to forget that they employ and work with adults, not children or pupils.

We employ adults who make important decisions in their own lives, decisions that are usually more important in the wider context than those they make at work: where to live, how to educate their children, who to have relationships with, how to manage their money, who to vote for, and so on. And yet, these same people walk into work and are asked to sign a chit for a pen out of the stationery cupboard, or are not allowed to make on-the-spot decisions to help out or serve a beneficiary/service user/volunteer/customer because they have to get permission. And so often those permissions are petty, silly things that simply get in the way of getting the job done.

In your organisation everyone is important. On many days they are more important than you. In my own organisation, when we have a lot of people attending our events, the most important person is Jill Thornton (former PA,

now Facilities Manager), because she has to make sure they are fed and watered and generally looked after. And she is the one who needs to make the decisions on that day about that work. She sees more of our customers than most other people in the entire organisation and she, therefore, has a bigger influence on how they perceive us and what we do than anyone else, including me.

Somehow, however, there is a two-way perception that leaders are supposed to be better, wiser, more influential and more knowledgeable than the people who they are leading. But how can they be? How can you be? The range of things that you are concerned with as you become more senior in an organisation is so wide that you cannot be expert in any of them any more. Your job is to employ the experts – and not just to advise you on what decisions you should take but to actually take the decisions about the areas in which they are expert. Your job is to surround yourself with people who know what they are doing and create an environment that helps them to shine. So many leaders behave like either teachers or parents and then get surprised and upset when their staff or volunteers behave like children or rebellious students!

The chief executive I admire the most is a guy called Tony Morgan who was one of my CEOs when I worked at the Industrial Society. He used to say that 'good leadership is about giving other people the space to show up'. In other words, letting them shine.

You need to develop a deep sense of appreciation for the efforts and aspirations of others in your organisation. The best leaders I have come across really, really do believe that they are not better than anyone else and will openly acknowledge that others are more skilled and experienced in particular areas. This is not paying lip service – it is the truth. And if it isn't the truth, if you really are appointing people into jobs that they don't do better than you, then you have to ask yourself *why* you aren't appointing more capable people.

And I do not buy the argument that says you can't get the quality of staff you need because of the relatively low levels of pay in the sector. There are a lot of skilled, intelligent, capable people out there who are not solely driven by the salary. If you don't believe your staff are high performers I suspect that you need to ask yourself if the question is not whether they have the right skills and experience but whether you're the sort of boss who can't let go. Your job as a leader is to remember that you pay them to be the expert so *you have to let go*. Be honest with yourself – is it you who is preventing them from being fabulous, even inadvertently?

### **You're not really human any more**

The reality is that when you aspire to lead others you will largely cease to be seen as a human being with the same fears, worries, hang-ups and hopes as them. Even though you probably feel all too human and fallible, most people both want and deserve a leader who they can look up to. That doesn't mean that they will always like you. Being moaned about behind your back is actually part of the job description! But they need someone who they believe deep down, when push comes to shove, can lead the organisation in the right





direction. The biggest test of your leadership ability is not what people do and say when things are going well (anyone can lead success), it's what they do and say when times are tough.

They will expect more of you in terms of how you look, what you say and how you behave. They will notice your mistakes.

They will be alert for any signs of hypocrisy. They will be generally unforgiving of the times when you are, or appear to be, hypocritical or unhelpful or obstructive. And even if they forgive, they sure as anything don't forget!

Your nerves and stress levels, if seen by others, will have a disproportionate impact on the nerves and stress levels of those around you. The more worried or stressed you are, the more worried and stressed they will be. The more calm and positive you are, the more calm and positive they will be.

They have high expectations – often unreasonable in the context of you as a human being but completely reasonable in the context of you as the guardian of the organisation and, ergo, their working lives. It means the pressures on you are exceptionally high – and you need to have the strength of character to accept it and deal with it. It's part of what you're paid for.

### **Nobody likes you!**

So you have to develop a healthy and robust sense of self. You will be criticised, sometimes fairly and sometimes unfairly, the moment you step into a senior role. And this criticism will come at you from all angles. Richard Olivier, in his excellent book, *Inspirational Leadership: Henry V and the Muse of Fire*, quotes from Shakespeare's *Henry V* where Henry is 'walking the job' (see Chapter 4) around the camp anonymously the night before the Battle of Agincourt, listening to the troops talking and complaining about him and his leadership.

In the play, Henry then gives a monologue about how hard leadership is and how often you are blamed for all sorts of things that really aren't your fault.

Upon the king! let us our lives, our souls,  
Our debts, our careful wives,  
Our children and our sins, lay on the king!

# Recommended reading

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