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Insight: Leadership

Jon G. Hall

ITNow Leadership Insight Column

Spring 2021

Jane grabbed the microphone in her left hand, strode to the front of the stage and shouted, ‘Give me an “L...”!’ The crowd gave her what she wanted, screaming ‘Eeeeeee!’ at the top of their voices.

Jane brought the mic back to her lips, and screamed in a rhythmic staccato, ‘Give me an ‘E...”!’ The crowd matched her volume, and screamed ‘Eeeeeee!’

“IT leadership is more than just working the crowd. The lucky few are natural born leaders.”

A third time Jane raised the microphone to her lips, crescendoing with “Give me an ‘A...”!” She let the syllable linger for greater effect. The crowd were really enjoying it now — they were hers screaming in unison ‘Ayyyyy!’

Jane knew she had them in the palm of her hand. They would do anything that she asked of them. She looked at her crowd; she felt their eyes on her. Raising the mic one last time to her lips she shouted: ‘What do you want to be?’

What does it mean to lead? What does it mean to you to lead?

While some will take Jane's approach, IT leadership is more than just working the crowd. The lucky few are natural born leaders, able to tune into the attitudes and experiences of those they lead without effort.

Others base their leadership on the leadership coaching of others. Some are deliberate leaders working through the ranks into their position at the top; some are accidental leaders, simply in the right (wrong?) place at the right (wrong?) time.

Let's do an experiment — it'll take two minutes — with some word association — you'll need something to write on. So, here we go: write down the first thing that comes into your head for these six words: football, update, pursuit, mountain, leader and badge. Got that? You should now have words is given at the end (we'll come back to them later) but

here are their associations for leader: pointer, decision, charisma, ethics, vision, first, value, compassionate, woman and follower. Any surprises?

You, as an IT leader, now have your answer to what it means to lead. Although it came to you in a flash — that's the nature of word association — it may reflect your many years of leadership experience, your route to the top. Will you pass your secret of leadership on to the next generation of leaders in your organisation?

Well, next time you're waiting for your video meeting to start, start a conversation with someone else who's waiting with you with “When I think of the word leader I think <add your word here>. What does it make you think of?”

One word that wasn't linked to leader was ‘reactive.’ Well, this year's BCS IT leadership report has just dropped — read about it in this issue on p6-9 — and, as usual, it is as definitive as they come. Spoiler alert: COVID-19 is in there. Who would have guessed that the worst viral attack on business in history would be the result of a human virus? The irony.

Reactions

Because of COVID-19, every leader has been in reactive mode in the last six months. Even those that have led well have led well in response to the virus. Reactivity isn't something you expect from a leader, but as the IT leader in your organisation, you've been the fulcrum of the reaction to the virus, insulating your team, your board, and your customers — whether internal or external — from its worst effects.

This is a defining moment for IT. IT was in the right place at the right time, mitigating the worst effects of a human virus. When it's time to rebuild, you, as IT leader, won't be riding shotgun.

The results

As promised, the other leaders' associations for the full word list were, in alphabetical order: award, ball, blue screen of death, charisma, chase, communication, compassionate, competition, complete, corporate, crowds, decision, desire, ears, efficiency, election, err, ethics, first, flirt, follower, goals, help, high, honour, hooligan, inform (x2), meaningless, mohammed, money, name, plan, pointer, pride, race, rashford, relentless, relevant, resilience, reward, sex, shiny, st mirren, summit, tenacity, time, tomorrow, top, tottenham, trophy, venus, view, vision, woman, word association, and work.

If you're looking for a puzzle, do some reverse word association: match the words above to the initial list. If you've managed that, try to tell which lists were produced by the female leaders and which by the males. The answer will appear in my next column for those that are interested.