



# Lessons in leadership from... Admiral Sir Trevor Soar

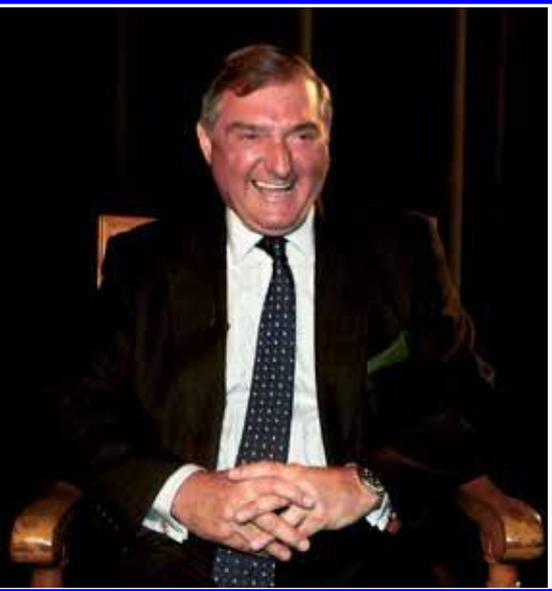
Our series on leadership this month continues with the former Commander-in-Chief Fleet of the Royal Navy.

Jyoti Shah Series Editor

Imagine commanding multiple aircraft carriers, amphibious ships and submarines with the power to control vast areas of the surrounding oceans and land. This is just what Admiral Sir Trevor Soar has done. We mere mortals can only dream of such feats as we go about our day-to-day lives.

The British Royal Navy is one of the best in the world. It is known for its ability to develop leaders who can run a vast high-performance organisation with a reputation of being able to deliver, often in the most extreme of situations. The focus on time management, meticulous planning for almost any scenario, and completing a mission with clear and direct communication and no misinterpretation of the message means there is much to learn from this profession.

Sir Trevor was born in Belper, Derbyshire, a town not exactly surrounded by the ocean. However, he had a love of the sea and joined the Royal Navy in 1975 at the lowest rank.



Sir Trevor today

“*People need to think like a captain even if they are a young sailor*”



Sir Trevor's story is one of ambition, passion and sheer determination. He joined the submarine service, regarded as one of the more exciting arms of the Navy, at the height of the Cold War and it was not long before he was captain of a nuclear power submarine. Seduced by the power to command, which he describes as an 'addictive drug yet so incredibly fulfilling', he rose through the ranks and was appointed Capability Manager in 2004 to the rank of Rear Admiral. In 2007, he was promoted to the rank of Vice-Admiral and, after more than 30 years of dedicated service to Queen and country, he was appointed Commander-in-Chief Fleet.

Sir Trevor admitted to making some risky decisions in his career, including leaving the submarines early and working for the Ministry of Defence. However, it is clear that they have worked in his favour and gained him invaluable experience as he juggled the highest rank in service with his role as NATO Maritime Commander, assuming direct responsibility for counter-piracy operations in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

Sir Trevor talks about his experience of taking the Navy's largest aircraft carrier and warship out of deep maintenance and staffing it with 1,200 personnel. Almost 50% of these men and women had never been to sea in a comparable ship, including the captain, but Sir Trevor rapidly trained them to operate the aircraft in all conditions and coordinated a battle group at war. This exemplifies his unique leadership under immense pressure. This is what great leaders do.

For the Navy, leadership and development starts on day one, believes Sir Trevor. Selection of Navy officers is not just based on their professional competence but also on their leadership potential. This is a profession where leadership is absolutely not bolted on, as happens in the medical profession. Leadership is developed throughout careers and assessed continually so that future positions are chosen based on leadership and levels of responsibility, allowing officers to grow into these roles as well as rank. For Sir Trevor, this happened at the age of 29 years when he

was just a Lieutenant and asked to take command of a submarine because he was deemed a good leader, as well as professionally competent enough to do the job. Leadership is a core pillar of Navy training.

About his own leadership style, Sir Trevor explains that 'it is key to have clarity of vision of where you are going so that each of the 36,000 Navy personnel I was responsible for know what I am trying to do and why'. He believes the other most important attribute for good, healthy leadership is having the humanity to reach down to the people. 'This is about visibility and leadership by walkabout.'

It is a common misconception that the armed forces are full of subordinates who mindlessly follow every order they are given. By contrast, much of the Navy was run on many softer skills, generating a workforce that thrives on autonomy, trust and responsibility. Sir Trevor often visited ships in his role as Commander-in-Chief and would spend as much time as possible with the sailors – often more than he did with the captain and other officers – so that the sailors felt that he was in touch with the issues they faced. It was also an opportunity for Sir Trevor to explain why certain decisions were taken at higher levels and thereby encourage a healthy dialogue, which rapidly disintegrated any hierarchical barriers. There is more chance of a sailor engaging in such rapport with his captain or the second sea-lord than an average FY1 doctor talking with their CEO in a hospital lift.

This is clearly a man who is in touch with his people. His approachability may be one of his lasting legacies with the Royal Navy, as is his ability to connect with people at all levels. He describes feeling as comfortable speaking to the Secretary of State as with a young sailor, and being able to engage meaningfully at any level. He recalls how at one time in Afghanistan up to one-third of the UK armed forces were Navy personnel. Instead of commanding from behind the safety of a desk in London, Sir Trevor wanted to experience first-hand what his servicemen and women were going through on a daily

basis. Counter to the advice given, Sir Trevor during a visit to Afghanistan, actually went on patrol with his Royal Marines. 'It brought home what they do every day and helped me relate to them.'

Sir Trevor then remembers the moment he attended a repatriation ceremony. In three separate incidents within a week, three Royal Marines were tragically killed. As a demonstration of his personal leadership style and compassion, Sir Trevor was there when they were brought home to their families and spent some time with them. As these Marines were killed under his overall command, he expected to be given a 'hard time' by the families but 'instead the sense that came out was one of pride, not anger'. Humanity is a vital ingredient for good leadership, Sir Trevor stresses.

Gaining the respect of more than 30,000 people and asking them to execute a strategy that has been delivered from 'up there' cannot be easy. 'Respect is earned in a long hard process. Word of mouth goes around, and people have an impression of you from the outset. This can be difficult to change without effective communication. Communication is not simply a message. Rather it is about making sure that the message is received and correctly interpreted at each level.'

He talks about having a 'grit in the oyster': a senior sailor whose aim was to challenge Sir Trevor. This person was the 'voice of the people' and would go directly to the commands and units to obtain feedback from the grassroots about messages and strategy from the Navy Board. This would ensure that the message got right to the bottom and was correctly interpreted, as well as conveying any feedback – comfortable or otherwise – back to Sir Trevor. 'This was a good feedback loop, and people felt that they were being listened to and therefore respected.' As long as any adverse feedback was not just a perception or individual concern, Sir Trevor took action on valuable ideas, thereby making everyone feel respected in the process. He also advises how as a good leader 'you should not pretend to be something

that you are not. People will see through that.'

By the time Sir Trevor retired from the Navy, he had achieved the highest rank in service and extensive experience at the senior level of defence, acquisition and change management. However, the Navy was a fraction of what he had started with, thanks to strategic cuts, making it much harder to protect British interests across the high seas.

With his extensive leadership skillset, Sir Trevor has set up an innovative organisation called The True Leader Company, and is also Chairman of an invitation-only network called The Leaders' Club. Having worked with many hospital trusts across the country in his new role, his experience of leadership in the NHS is not entirely positive.

'Doctors spend their lives training to excel as specialists and are expected to be just as good at leadership once they reach the top of their profession as consultants. It is almost like being thrown the keys to a car when learning and being told to drive. "By the way, in six months' time, we will assess how you are doing." That just won't work,' he insists.

'Leadership should be something that is done every day and at every level by nurses, doctors, managers and the CEO. Developing staff so that they can think and work without constraints will make a difference to the organisation. People need to think like a captain even if they are a young sailor.'

The NHS needs to 'weave the thread of leadership through the fabric of the organisation,' explains Sir Trevor. His message to the NHS is to 'teach leadership from the outset and not just bolt it on'.

His final thoughts on the topic? 'Leadership should include walking through the hospital and meeting the staff on the wards, regardless of your position, to ensure that everyone is working for the good of the organisation and with a common goal.'

## Admiral Sir Trevor Soar's leadership skillset

1. Clarity of vision for the organisation.
2. Humanity. 'You have to be able to understand people's emotions, aspirations and perceptions, even if you do not agree with them. Understand what matters to people and listen to them. Not many people listen.'
3. Effective communication.
4. Competence. 'People show respect if you are professionally competent.'

## Admiral Sir Trevor Soar's greatest leader

Nelson. He had humanity, respected people, empowered them to use their initiative, and followed a philosophy of mission command. His hands-off leadership style fostered a culture of mutual trust and respect. He equipped, trained and trusted people to get on with what they do best.

## Five favourite things

1. Family and friends
2. Sport, especially rugby
3. Skiing
4. Sailing
5. Developing tomorrow's leaders

Coming in the January issue... Lord Ian Blair