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.

Imagining 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 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’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.

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