

Foreword

Running a successful small–medium sized enterprise (SME) is no picnic. For those in charge it can be a hostile and often lonely environment. Surviving and staying afloat is challenging enough. The marketplace presents difficulties and opportunities that may lead to growth where growth in turn demands change. Change too early and you could end up with excessive overhead and waste. Change too late and you risk losing competitiveness.

There is also the problem of which change to adopt. There are literally hundreds of alternative routes espoused by enthusiastic academics, consultants and self-styled gurus. There will be no shortage of conviction or advocacy from often conflicting sources. The options facing the owner-manager, director, partner or senior manager (hereafter described as owner/manager) are often bewildering but choices have to be made to sustain and achieve success.

I first encountered this dilemma in 1999 when I was asked to chair a series of failing Business Links in Lancashire, North West England and create a viable and effective entity from the ashes of their predecessors. I had successfully transformed and run a large business as a Chief Executive, so my forte was mainly with the SMEs' bigger siblings. I thought it useful, therefore, to spend my early days talking to lots of SME leaders. It was only then that I began to appreciate the challenge. At that particular time, funding for business support was actually quite generous. However, the complaint made to me repeatedly was that supply was largely related to funding availability rather than to the specific needs of the client base.

In terms of more generic provision, particularly leadership development, similar arguments were trotted out. Whilst personally enrolling on a prestigious business course may be both satisfying and enriching, in most instances the owner/managers in question had neither the time nor the resources to go down that particular path. They want immediate guidance related to immediate problems.

I found this to be intractable, a problem without a practical solution. Everybody had issues but by and large they were different, or certainly they seemed so. Designing a support system to be entirely bespoke would be both excessively expensive and probably highly inefficient. Fortunately there were people about with better imagination than me: specifically my dynamic Chief Executive, Clive Memmott, who decided to tackle

the problem head on and enlisted the support of Lancaster University Management School (LUMS). Thanks to the energy and foresightedness of Sue Cox, Ellie Hamilton, Al Mather, Steve Kempster and Sue Smith, together, they came up with the idea of the LEAD programme.

By sheer coincidence I soon found myself on the periphery of the £1 million pilot and £15 million LEAD dissemination programme as a Masterclass speaker for many of the deliverers across the North West of England. I began to marvel at how LEAD had such a positive impact on owner/managers across the region. If only we could bottle it, I wondered to myself repeatedly.

After the demise of the regional development agencies, Sue Smith obtained part funding, charged the SMEs and continued to make LEAD sustainable at LUMS. She also worked with the University of Swansea to leverage nearly £10 million to roll it out across Wales and has leveraged funding to run a similar programme in the North East of England. In parallel, as a private provider, Stewart Barnes has run LEAD on a self-financing basis in the South West of England and Steve Kempster is internationalizing LEAD.

The outcome has been quite spectacular for the business community. For the mercenary:

- average company size grew by 27 per cent;
- average employment increased by 13 per cent;
- 59 per cent of participants now trading with each other, raising millions in new business.

For the broader minded:

- 100 per cent felt themselves to be better leaders;
- 100 per cent felt more effective and confident;
- 97 per cent had grown their companies or felt confident of doing so;
- 83 per cent recorded improvements in their personal lives.

My personal preference is to major on the second set of outcomes. Enhancing self-esteem and confidence is the greatest contribution any leadership programme can give to the SME community. However, the financial benefits should not be underestimated. We all know that the UK has suffered from poor productivity over decades. The country is 17 per cent behind the G7 average and 30 per cent behind the US and Germany. That this should continue to go on for so long is a national disgrace but it still doesn't seem to be high on the political agenda. The methodology espoused by the authors could be the key to future success for

the nation. Any doubters should read David Macleod and Nita Clarke's inspirational report¹ "Engaging for Success" which recommends LEAD.

Each time I come away from a LEAD programme, I am thrilled by the transformational impact it has on participants' lives. The energy and enthusiasm in the room is always quite startling as is the way peers relate to each other. This approach does seem to fill a void in the lives of SME leaders and helps them resolve so many of the challenges they constantly face.

I do hope you will explore everything this book has to offer as it attempts to bridge the gap between academia and practice. It provides a real-life narrative encapsulating the development of three owner/managers on LEAD whilst explaining the key theories, models and techniques that underpin the leadership methods and approaches deployed.

The authors have created a unique opportunity for you, the reader, to sample some of the joys and benefits of this extraordinary approach into leadership learning in the SME context.

As a reader, you may be an academic, undergraduate, postgraduate or doctoral student. You could be a policy-maker or a leadership development practitioner. You may be an owner/manager: part of the alumni from the 2000 plus participants who want to compare their experiences and learning with aspects highlighted in the book; or a delegate undertaking the programme; or an owner/manager intrigued to explore the topic of leadership and its impact on growth in the small business. For those in SMEs, my recommendation would be to tackle it as a team, either with other members of your management group or alternatively with peers from elsewhere.

The single most impressive dynamic of LEAD in general has been the power of solving problems by close networking, using simple approaches to diagnose and resolve. The process is infinitely variable, totally relevant and life enhancing. Yet, when stripped back, many of the issues that are faced are common to all. You are not alone, there is support out there!

Enjoy.

Professor John J. Oliver OBE
Team Enterprise Solutions

¹ Macleod, D. and Clarke, N. (2009), 'Engaging for success: Enhancing performance through employee engagement,' available at: Department of Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, www.berr.gov.uk/files/file52215.pdf.