

Background

The future of leadership

1

The use of war as a **metaphor** for business is one that still prevails into the modern day. Take the book *The Art of War*. It dates back to 6th century China and outlines the key techniques for warfare. It is still basic reading for any **military strategist**, but interestingly it has also become a major best-seller on the list of business books for **aspiring managers**. Its tips on **outsmarting** your opponent and winning negotiations make it required reading for many business executives.

2

The metaphor also extends to leadership. The image of the industrialist leading his workers forward seemed to resemble those old romantic paintings of bold heroic generals on horses heading into battle. Even well into the mid-twentieth century, management was viewed as something similar to being an army captain, with your workers obeying like loyal troops.

3

But nowadays, when you ask people to name important leaders of the 20th century, they mention people such as Gandhi or Nelson Mandela, and in business, Bill Gates or Warren Buffet. None of these people fits the stereotypical image of the warring leader. So somewhere in the 20th century, business leaders evolved from authoritarian bosses into ... well, what exactly? After all, leadership nowadays has become much harder to **pin down**.

4

Understanding what leadership is nowadays needs us to understand how the world of work has changed in the **latter** half of the last century. As work has become more specialized and technical, companies require more and more highly-skilled, educated employees. Suddenly, the boss isn't someone who can do everyone else's job as well as their own. He or she (another leadership change!) is surrounded by people more qualified than him or her and so the job is more about making use of people as

resources. Suddenly, the leader seen as a dictator shouting out orders has moved on to the humane listener.

5

That doesn't mean that great leaders don't need any of the qualities of a war leader. At times of crisis or uncertainty, the company will look to their charismatic CEO to lead them out of an economic slump and into a bright, bold, new future. Similarly, founders of companies build their businesses on strong vision and single-mindedness. But it's noticeable that as many successful companies become much larger, the single-minded visionary, who created the company from nothing, eventually withdraws to make way for groups of people, all with different but complementary leadership skills.

6

One business guru, Charles Schwenk, even calls for 'weaker leadership' in these modern times. His argument is that good decision-making emerges from diversity of opinion. He believes that by avoiding the single-vision, the company is prepared for change and flexible enough to respond to any situation. Although few companies would respond well to the idea of 'weak leadership', Schenk illustrates his point by describing how Microsoft, at first, didn't seem to see the significance of the Internet and how it could benefit. Reportedly, the resistance mainly came from the company's founder and leader Bill Gates. However, other managers at Microsoft continually **lobbied** Gates until he agreed that Microsoft should offer Internet services. This, Schwenk believes, is an example of where weakening your leadership style allows diversity of opinion to succeed and make (what turned out to be) a wise decision.

7

So what next for leadership and where will it come from? Will it be stronger or weaker? More dominant or more equal? So far in this century, the leaders who **empower** as opposed to those only seeking power are winning the battle.

Exercises

1 Read the text. Discuss these questions with a partner.

- 1 How does the author compare business and leadership to war? Why were they similar in the past?
- 2 Why does the author suggest that this is not relevant anymore?

2 Read the text again. Match summaries a–h to paragraphs 1–7. There is one extra incorrect sentence.

- a Good leaders are no longer necessarily fighters. _____
- b The changing nature of work has changed the nature of leadership. _____
- c Business is like war 1 _____
- d There are many occasions when good leaders need to give in to the consensus. _____
- e Hands-off management is the current trend but will it win? _____
- f The days of the dominant leadership style will never return. _____
- g There are still times when strong leadership is needed. _____
- h When business leaders were like generals. _____

3 Match the words in bold in the text to definitions or synonyms 1–8.

- 1 something which is used in a literary way to describe something with similar characteristics: _____
- 2 define: _____
- 3 tried to persuade: _____
- 4 give responsibility and space to make their own decisions: _____
- 5 second: _____
- 6 a person who plans wars: _____
- 7 being cleverer than: _____
- 8 people who would like to become managers one day: _____

4 As well as war, we use other types of metaphor in the language of business. Each sentence below includes a common business idiom (with the meaning in brackets). Match them to these types of metaphor: FLYING, SAILING, SPORT, FOOD, COLOUR

- 1 The economy took a nosedive last week. (The economy fell suddenly.)
- 2 We want a bigger slice of the pie. About 20% more. (We want a larger amount.)
- 3 Could you give me a ballpark figure for what you might charge? (Give me an estimated price.)
- 4 At this rate the project will never get off the ground. (The project will never start.)
- 5 Finance tell me your department is currently in the red. What are you going to do about it? (Your department has less than zero.)
- 6 Our new products are selling like hot cakes! (They are selling very fast!)
- 7 They won't agree to the deal until they see it in black and white. (Until they see it in writing.)
- 8 She's a great manager because she runs a really tight ship. (She manages her department in a very organized and controlled way.)

5 Can you think of a business idiom in your own language? Translate it for the class and explain the meaning.

6 Look back at the text and choose three words that you could use in your day-to-day work.

7 Work with a partner. Discuss these questions.

- 1 How close is the leadership style in your company to the leadership styles mentioned in the text?
- 2 What type of leader are you or what type of leader would you be? Why do you or would you approach leadership in this way?