

**"I WANT TO
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Steve Radcliffe
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Steve Radcliffe is one of Europe's most successful leadership coaches. Best known for his Future – Engage – Deliver leadership model, over the last 20 years he has worked with hundreds of chief executives, directors and their teams, in organisations as diverse as Boots, First Direct, and the UK's Civil Service, where he contributes to the prestigious High Potential Development Scheme (HPDS).

Radcliffe grew up in Wigan, and studied at Oxford University. From there, he joined Procter and Gamble, later moving to the US to become the CEO of a division of the multinational business Tambrands. In 1991, he left to pursue a career as a leadership coach. High profile clients have included Sir Gus O'Donnell, Cabinet Secretary and head of the Civil Service; former Unilever chairman and now chairman of Reuters, Niall Fitzgerald; and Richard Baker, former CEO of Alliance Boots.

Until now Radcliffe has avoided the media spotlight. But that is about to change with his launch of a campaign to make leadership more accessible to people in the UK. His mission is to demystify leadership – not just in business but in hospitals, schools and every part of national life.

Eschewing conventional publishing wisdom, in 2009 Radcliffe is publishing two books: one, with Financial Times Prentice Hall, will be distributed through the normal bookshop channels; while his other book (self-published) will be available to voluntary and public sector organisations priced at just £5.

Des Dearlove talked to Steve Radcliffe about his ideas on leadership and how they apply to the NHS.

You've worked with some of the UK's top leaders. But as a leadership coach you have tended to be in the background. So what suddenly prompted you to write a book – and not just one but two?

You're right. I've worked with lots of leaders over the years, and I have seen first-hand the difference that good leadership can

make. Not just in business, but in every area of national life. But what I see when I look around is that far too many organisations have poor leadership or no leadership, and that's a terrible waste of human potential. People can feel it, but they don't know what to do to change it. I want to get leadership out in the open so that we can all start practising it even more.

So why did you end up publishing two books? How did that come about?

The short version is that I wanted to write a leadership book that will actually be read and used! Research says most aren't. So I set out to produce something different; it is slim and gets to the point quickly and constantly encourages practice. It's not about leadership in general. It's about *your* leadership. I've written it so the reader can easily see what practices to take on in order to grow as a leader.

Initially, it was a self-published book and then Financial Times Prentice Hall said they wanted to publish an expanded version for business readers. The initial version will be available at a lower price for the not-for-profit sector – health, education, charities, and government.

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It sounds like you want to start a public debate?

I certainly don't just want to be a bloke who wrote a book on leadership! I want to be a catalyst for a new approach to developing ourselves as leaders. I want to encourage lots more people in Britain to see themselves as leaders. I want people in organisations everywhere to feel valued and engaged. And I want organisations to be places where there is robust dialogue about what we are delivering and how we are doing as leaders.

Why does leadership matter so much?

It matters because of what it does. For close to 20 years, I have sat with leaders and leadership teams at all levels of all sorts of organisations. I am now convinced that leadership is the one ingredient above all others that has individuals, teams and organisations thrive. I have seen how brilliantly people can feel and perform when leadership has sparked them into life. And I've also seen the cynicism and poor performance when leadership has been missing or weak and people are left rudderless and spiritless. I'm also concerned that the world is at a time when we need leadership more than ever.

What's stopping us practising leadership now?

For one thing, there is a whole load of baggage that gets in the way. Leadership can be seen as elitist – only for the chosen few. It can also seem very complicated, even mysterious. I want to debunk all of that and encourage more people to be leaders at every level in every organisation.

You've talked about what leadership isn't – elitist and complicated. So what is it?

When I talk about leadership I'm talking about being at your best, and helping others to be at their best, to make something happen that you care about. It really is as simple as that – and when someone does that, it is fantastic to be around.

I first started seeing the power of leadership in my first days in the business world at Procter and Gamble. And since then I've been fascinated by the question of why does this person, team or organisation deliver but others do not. And because of the baggage, it is easy to think that only certain people can do it. But I don't believe that's the case. We can all be at our best. We can all interact with others to get the best out of them.

How does all this apply to an organisation like the NHS?

Raising the standard of leadership at all levels is completely relevant to the NHS. After all, if a business is poorly led, people can lose a job or miss a deadline. If a hospital is poorly led, people can lose a life. We've seen this recently in the hospital with the high number of deaths. From what I read, the sense of 'what are we building in the future that we will be proud of' had been completely lost and the focus had turned to short-term targets unconnected to what really mattered. I'm sure it would have been a very different picture if there had been people at all levels consciously and openly practising their leadership every day.

What is different about your approach?

There are too many messages out there that you've got to understand lots of leadership theories to have any chance of being any good at it. All this is seriously misleading and debilitating. We need some different messages about leadership. What I want to shout from the roof-tops is that leading is a natural, human activity; we can all do it; it's not at all complicated; and the key is not in how many theories you know, it's in how much practice you do. I want to encourage people at all levels of organisation to get in touch with what they care about and step into the leadership role. And I then want to guide them away from theorising so that they throw themselves into practice.

So how do you do that?

When I thought about the scores of effective leaders I've seen in action and from the 200 or so books I've read on the topic, I soon realised that leading always involves just three pieces.

First, whether you want to be a leader for a great holiday, an effective team or an outstanding hospital, your leading always starts in the future with ideas of how you'd like things to be. You don't start with what you have. You start with what you want in the future.

Second, you then engage people so they actively want to build that future with you.

And third, you get on and make it happen; with them, you deliver. So leading is always about Future – Engage – Deliver. It's dressed up in a thousand different ways but this is what it always boils down to. And all of us can do it.

So if it's that simple, what prevents us from being more effective leaders?

The first major barrier for many of us is how we think about ourselves and leadership. Far too many of us don't think of ourselves as leaders. We have beliefs which tell us that leaders are the senior ones in the organisation or we haven't read enough or we're not bright enough or whatever.

We all have these limiting beliefs, which can hold us back from bringing our best to the game. Second, among those of us who do see ourselves as leaders, too few of us consciously practise to grow our leadership and get feedback on how we are doing. Why should leading be any different to skiing, singing or playing the clarinet? In all areas like these, you improve through practice and feedback. Leading is just the same but how many people come to work conscious of 'this is what I'm going to practise today' and 'this is who I'll get feedback from'? We would all grow faster as leaders if we took on this approach rather than exploring another theory.

So are you saying that once we identify our limiting beliefs that leadership is easy?

At times leadership is easy. We've all had times when everything seems to happen just fine. But we also know that at times it's not easy. The good news is that it gets easier with practice and two particular practices come to mind. One, practise noticing your limiting beliefs so you recognise when they are at work – remember, they're just beliefs, they're not the truth! Two, build your leadership muscles through practice.

What are these leadership muscles – and how do we grow them?

We can all be leaders because we all have leadership muscles – we just need encouragement to flex them and practice to build them. First, we all have the muscle of being able to imagine things in the future we'd love to see. The trick is practising that in a conscious way. In other words, deliberately taking time to think about and imagine a better future. Second, we can all be engaging. We have all interacted with others so they've been happy to work with us or help us. With practice, we can make bigger requests and get people around us to take up bigger challenges with us. And third, we have all had others deliver something for us. Again with practice, we can stimulate delivery from more people facing more complex challenges.

The trouble is that most of us don't have the energy to do our jobs and work out our leadership muscles – we're too busy getting results!

And that's absolutely part of the issue. Organisations are not going to get anywhere great if all they focus on is delivering this short-term target and that short-term result.

There's the story you may have heard of – the two stone-carvers. You ask the first what he's doing and he says "I'm carving stone". You ask the second and he says "I'm building a cathedral". For individuals,

teams and organisations to have a chance of delivering brilliantly we have to be in touch with that bigger, future picture and that sense of the 'cathedral' we are building. The good news, in fact the great news, is that when we do, this gives us energy. And that's quite different to 'carve more stone, and more, and more...'

There is so much in life and at work that can drain our energy. The best way to keep your energy strong is to be, as I say, "up to something"; in other words have an aspiration, a dream, a vision that you want to see in the future. And it doesn't matter how big or small it is. It can be about you and a few colleagues or your team or your department or your organisation or the planet. But be up to something. That way, when the setbacks and disappointments come along, you can rediscover your energy by reconnecting with those big questions of 'what do I care about, what am I up to, what is the future am I leading for?' ■