



THE NECKTIE  
THAT'S NO HELP

# Losing the leadership plot?

By **EDWARD HANDYSIDE**, managing director of Forward Vision

A FIREMAN told me how, on the way back to the station after the end of their shift, his crew pulled over outside an electrical store so that one of them could buy some batteries. They were observed by a bystander who phoned in a complaint that firemen were 'shopping in work time'. The resulting enquiry involved the whole hierarchy of management, a gamut of interviews, hearings and meetings with officials; the full panoply of HR procedure – all at the tax payers expense.

'It was pathetic,' said the fireman. 'In the old days, the chief would just pull us all in for a severe reprimand. He'd tell us not to let it happen again... and that would have been that.'

In a couple of organisations in the North East – one a crucial part of the health service, the other a manufacturing business – a third or more of the workforce have been subject to formal disciplinary proceedings at some stage or another. In the first organisation, disciplinary proceedings – including involvement in hearings and appeals – takes up more executive time than can be devoted to improving the organisation's performance; in the second, the plant manager actually uses the number of recorded warnings issued as a kind of informal KPI – if the number starts to drop managers and supervisors are criticised for not pulling up their people often enough.

In another organisation, a loss-making food business, the number of direct employees has been cut back whilst the HR department has almost doubled in size. In this company, line managers complain bitterly that the function constantly undermines their efforts to

deal effectively with the handful of miscreants who conspire to make life difficult for everyone else.

The formal 'management of people' has become a high profile, highly complicated and very costly business. It's boom time for our burgeoning ranks of HR professionals and yet there is often a dearth of real leadership at the front line – just where we need it most.

Of course in a modern organisation we need basic standards that ensure fair treatment and respect for human dignity but the best companies also recognise that real leadership cannot be brought about by remote control. They know that it is folly to separate responsibility for managing task and process from that of managing people. Their managers and supervisors are allowed and expected to manage and are given the training, authority and discretion to determine for themselves the when, whether and how to invoke the company's disciplinary procedure. Such invocations consequently become very rare events.

One of our biggest problems today is that our concepts of leadership and management are formulated and policed by those who have never in their lives had to run a production line, clean part of a hospital, cut someone from a wrecked vehicle, deal with an upset customer or persuade contractors to dig trenches when its raining.

Some still avoid the reality that leaders must know and be able to perform the tasks of their team members. They take refuge in the fallacious assertion that 'interpersonal skill', charisma, charm or some other arcane virtue

will compensate. But every leader needs both job knowledge and management skill. Soldiers will not follow officers who don't know how to fire a rifle or who cannot climb a six-foot wall carrying 40 pounds of kit. They need not be the very fittest in their units nor the very best shot but they need sufficient know how and ability to instruct and inspire others; to be able to demonstrate performance of the task personally if required to do so.

Real discipline has little to do with admonishments, still less with recorded warnings or procedure: it usually involves training. Training requires knowledge. Of course job knowledge is not itself enough. Many disparage the promotion of someone with excellent job skills but limited management ability. But the reverse is just as bad and, in our experience, just as common. An example from the great W. Edwards Deming's book *Out of the Crisis*:

**Production worker (recorded):** They give you no instruction. What they do is set you down at a machine and tell you to go to work.

**There is nobody to teach you?**

My colleagues help me, but they have their own work to do.

**Don't you have a foreman?**

He knows nothing.

**Isn't it his job to help you learn yours?**

If you need help, you don't go to somebody that looks dumber than you are do you? He wears a neck tie, but he doesn't know anything.

**But the neck tie helps doesn't it?**

No.