



## Asking Yourself The Really Tough Questions

When I decided to theme my September 08 newsletter on leadership, I wanted to include the thoughts of a successful business leader.



Currently Group Chief Executive of the Welsh Rugby Union, Roger Lewis's CV is as long as it's varied: musician; Head of Radio One's music department; producer of the Capital Radio breakfast show; worldwide president of the Decca record company; MD of EMI Records' classical division and premier group; MD of Classic FM; MD of ITV Wales

One of the main things I wanted to know was if there were any common characteristics between

winning sports people, top musicians, and successful business people.

*Read on ...*

**SA:** *You've had a very interesting and varied career to date Roger, but have there been any similarities between the roles and your approach to them?*

**RL:** Yes, my career has been very rich, varied, and diverse but I've always felt there was a very clear thread running through it. Identifying, nurturing and developing talent has been at the heart of every role I've had. I've then worked with that talent to create compelling and engaging content with real value.

**SA:** *You've worked with very creative and successful people in music and sport. Do they share common characteristics?*

**RL:** Raw talent plus work ethic together with an extraordinary attitude are the main traits. Innate talent needs to exist in the first place of course, but no-one achieves world-wide status without backing it up with a huge amount of work.

They all have a desire to perform at the very best. In a sports context that means winning and not being satisfied with second best. As with top sports people, successful performing musicians have a real sense of integrity. By integrity I mean they can ask themselves the really tough questions after a performance, like did I really achieve my full potential? They never accept second best and even when they've won, they can put it to one side and focus on the next game or performance.

**SA:** *So what you are talking about is the importance of being honest with yourself.*

**RL:** That's right. I think the real test of integrity is being able to ask yourself tough questions or asking people around you who you know will be honest with you and tell it straight. Then you have to build on it; really seek to understand yourself.

**SA:** *Once you've spotted talent in an individual, what do you need to do to nurture, develop, and ultimately keep them?*

**RL:** Basically, you have to know the purpose of your organisation; its values and its beliefs. Then you need to talk to your talented people very early on about their values, beliefs and vision, and make sure they are aligned with the company's.

Like anything in business, you have to be prepared to take risk. With young talent it's knowing how to manage the development process with that aspect of risk, and understanding the rate and speed of coaching that's needed to nurture the talent. That applies not only in sport and performance, but in business as well.

The risk is exposing talent to the right environment at the right time. When do you expose them to something that is significantly high profile? When do you allow them to go on the stage or on the field?

What is the right competitive environment? And that's a judgement call.

In sport, the two key things for talent development, are having the right coaches and the right competitive structure. If you are involved with a team sport, players have to learn to connect with the team, the situation, and the competitive environment. With musicians it's about making sure you've got the right mentor and the right audiences and the right auditoriums, at the right time.

In developing talent you need a range of skills. You assume the role of mentor and friend, but also that of the challenger. You have to inspire the talent's imagination.

I believe an emotional connection is ever so important because it's got to be based on authenticity: it's got to be real. Talent, too, has to be real. Manufactured talent has a very limited life; you can't sustain it. So it's important to identify real talent and what you're looking for is initial capability. Capability and attitude can be developed but you want that spark of genius. That comes from someone who can look at a situation in a different way and basically create magic.

**SA:** *Do you think all of that's true in a business sense? Perhaps not in quite the same way but do the same principles apply?*

**RL:** Oh absolutely. Any manager developing a business should have three personas rolled into one. You can be the creative leader and work with your teams on imagination, inspiring them, working on vision.

Then there's the managerial persona. That one needs to be very sensible, very predictable. The third needs to be technocratic, hard-headed, uncompromising, very detail orientated.

Those sorts of styles suit different environments. So for instance if there's a tough job like sorting out a company with huge problems, you would lean towards the more technocratic style. If something needs to be solid and maintained, you want the manager-craftsman style. But if you want to build, and that's what I've always done, I think you've got to draw on your artistic side.

**SA:** *You've talked about taking risk when developing talent. Did you feel you had innate ability or was there a process you had to go through?*

**RL:** It's always been more intuitive for me. Now I can look back and analyse where I've got it right and where I got it wrong.

I've always been comfortable with risk in my life, both in business and personally. A lot of my colleagues find it strange that I could go from being a musician to all the other roles I've held, and then go into rugby. The risk of climbing up one tree and jumping to another has never phased me.

The key thing is that it's been measured risk. The fundamental thing I've learned, and I've learned the hard way as well, is that leadership has to be team centric. So that when you are taking risk, particularly when you are taking the business in a particular direction, you've got to test yourself and you've got to do that with the trusted colleagues around you.

**SA:** *Speaking of teams, you've brought in a new executive board at the Welsh Rugby Union (WRU) and you are building a five year plan. How have you gone about it and what are the critical things about building a senior level team? How do you make sure you've got the best to do what's needed?*

**RL:** I've learned this over the years: no one business leader can deliver everything that's needed in a multi-faceted, complex organisation. You need to understand your own strengths and weaknesses and understand the role of the Chief Executive.

Many smarter people than me have written about this, but quite simply my role is to have an idea of what direction we are heading in and where we are heading to. The people around you have to agree the broad sense of direction. Then you need skilful people around you to figure out how you are going to get there.

To quote Jim Collins, my job is to 'drive the bus'. I need to make sure I have the right people in the right seats on that bus and that I haven't shied away from taking people completely off the bus or moving them around the seats.

So how do you start building a team? Well first of all it's important to understand the organisation's purpose. Where does the business want to go? How quickly does it want to get there? How quickly CAN it get there? Then you need a sense of the organisation's overarching vision and mission. I've always looked for three things in people and they are capability, attitude and integrity. I firmly believe you really do have to make sure you have the right people, with the right skills in the right place for your organisation.

The situation at WRU is a good example of this approach in action. I quickly identified several roles that would be critical for our future success. The first of these was group finance director. Sorting out finances was crucial because I realised that the fire-power to take us forward would come through revenue, and I also needed a marketing and commercial director.

The whole environment I came into was incredibly litigious and complicated so an in-house head of legal was vital. I brought in a head of communications to really communicate what we were doing. I then raised the profile of some existing positions — head of operations, head of compliance, and the stadium manager. The latter was important because we own and manage the Millennium Stadium.

Once I felt I was getting the machine right, I had to think about how we could start to invest in the content and creation.

That's when I started to look at the talent creators and brought in Warren Gatland as head coach. Warren joined us at the end of 2007 and we delivered phenomenal success incredibly quickly: far more success than we thought possible in fact! We won the Grand Slam and we produced record turnover this year.

**SA:** *You used the phrase 'team centric' earlier. Why do you feel it's important?*

**RL:** A high performing team is a real asset to any business. This current team can develop itself; create the dynamic. That makes us all, me included, raise our bar and sharpen our act. Positive peer group pressure is so important. What I've looked for in everyone in the team is, from the bottom up, integrity, attitude, and capability.

Integrity and trust are vital to teamwork. My job is to make sure the relationships are authentic because that creates reliability and consistency. I'm deeply honest with my team; personally and professionally. I have to give them a sense of purpose. That involves setting goals and objectives, and giving the team meaning and direction.

At the same time I've got to be confident and I've got to be tough. I have to lean towards action, curiosity, courage, and risk because people want results. Courage is one of our values, by the way.

**SA:** *You've mentioned values a number of times. People talk a lot about living the values; how do you go about making them observable behaviours and not just something to hang on the wall?*

**RL:** You've got to tell real stories about them. When you identify what fits in with what you really, really believe, you've got to emphasise and at times, celebrate it. You've also got to spot examples of when this stuff is happening and say 'yeah, that's what we do'.

Our values are integrity, excellence, success, and courage. We've also added two more: family and humour. We are a family and family is an important element in Wales, rugby, and sport in general. In all families there will be arguments and differences of opinion. Some will separate. But if you have real values and beliefs at the heart of the family, you can weather the most brutal of storms.

You don't often find humour on a list of organisational values do you? Sport is a crazy world and there is one big difference between this environment and other types of business. Businesses

desperately need certainty especially if they're listed on the stock market and are looking for shareholder growth.

The paradox of sport is that it needs uncertainty. Of course we all work hard to create certainty and to win. But for every winner there will be a loser and that's what makes it exciting for the audience. And that's why I think you definitely need that sense of humour because passions go from zero to a hundred. In Wales, we're either in agony or in ecstasy with our rugby: there is no grey.

Values cannot be imposed from the top down. They've got to grow in all manner of different directions. And you can't be embarrassed about them. On their own the words are meaningless. You've got to make them come alive. I certainly look for opportunities wherever I can for humour. One would always applaud excellence and success. And you have got to walk the integrity line. For instance when you've made a mistake, you put your hand up. The whole nature of risk means you will make mistakes. We all learn more from our mistakes than from our successes.

**SA:** *Almost casually you gave me a big catalogue of your successes and big changes that you've taken on, and you said you weren't phased at all. You must have had great self-belief particularly as you said friends thought you were mad to move around as you have.*

*Everyone in business has to think about different moves; getting out of the comfort zone, maybe not to the extent that you have. However, a lot of people do seem to have self-limiting beliefs. They persuade themselves they can't do a particular thing because a teacher told them they couldn't when they were eight. Do you have any advice? Is there anything you've learned or perhaps said to people to help them trust themselves more?*

**RL:** Everything I've done, I've wanted to do. Everything I've done I've been absolutely passionate about and I've believed in it. What I've never, ever done is do something purely for the money or because it was a 9-5 job.

We spend far too much time in work for it not to be part of our lives. I actually don't believe in work life balance. I think it's more life balance because work is such a large chunk of your life and you've got to really enjoy it. I've always loved coming to work. It's my life, not just my work.

When I've moved on it's sometimes been a wrench but I've known it was time to move. That's been because I've taken something as far as I can or I've felt there was something out there more compelling and attractive. For the most part I've done three to five years in a role. I think five is about right to reflect and ask what's next.

**SA:** *You mentioned earlier about learning from your mistakes. Do you see that as a learning opportunity? How have you dealt with failures?*

**RL:** Oh it hurts. It takes some time for it to sink in. You don't think 'Oh yeah I failed there let's move on.' It really hurts.

Sometimes it takes a while to put the pieces together and make sense of it all. The most important thing then is to be able to talk to close colleagues or friends just to try and figure out what really happened.

When I was at the BBC in the late 80s and I became head of Radio One, I was given a coach. It was hugely helpful. Throughout the last 20 years I've always tried to identify someone who can coach me in some shape or form. I've got a coach at the moment. Personal development has been very important for me.

I don't have a MBA and I don't come from a management training background. I've learnt it as I've done it. But I've always seized every opportunity to read about business and management, study it, talk about it. Most importantly though, the biggest learning is actually doing it.

**SA:** *You've obviously had to adapt because of the different environments you've worked in and the people you've worked with. How would you describe your leadership style and are you very conscious of having to adapt for different team members?*

**RL:** It has to be done in a very sensitive and professional way. You have to know when to be a friend, when to be a coach, when to direct, when to be supportive. And you need to know your weaknesses. My preferred type of leadership may not be appropriate for certain situations. When you are under pressure you revert to type and if your type is inappropriate for the situation you need to be very aware of that.

Working with coaches I've learned my strengths and weaknesses in certain situations. The main thing is to be in control under pressure. It's knowing what you need to say and do at a particular moment or what not to say. You need a tool box of styles to work with others to achieve results.

**SA:** *There is a danger with people at the top that they always feel they have to know and I think leaders have to be open with people, particularly with their senior team.*

**RL:** One of the most powerful things is to say, 'I don't know, help me'. Have the confidence to be able to say that. You do learn that over the years. If you can express it in an honest way, the human response is to help. We have to leverage each other's skills, personalities, and strengths. We also should recognise that we've all got weaknesses and think about how we can support those.

**SA:** *Yes, I agree. People think it makes them weak to admit they don't know something but if you do it authentically it actually makes you stronger.*

**RL:** Absolutely. At the same time, and this is the contradiction, my preferred style is to know as much as I can absorb about what's going on in the organisation. And that's not because I want to control it. I really want and need to know what's going on so I can live and breathe it.

**SA:** *It's interesting talking to you and hearing parallels with what Sainsbury's CEO, Justin King said when I interviewed him recently. He talked about the need to get his senior team in place and to make sure they were empowered. Once he had got that right, he was then able to get out into the rest of the business.*

**RL:** I totally agree. Once I've got the machine running, I've got to be the advocate for it. We've got to remember the good times and talk ourselves up. It's a cultural thing in Wales – we're not very good at doing that. You have to do it because when you get into the bad times you can say to your colleagues, 'hey do you remember how it felt, how it smelled? And we'll get there again.'

Recognising the good times and celebrating them doesn't mean you get complacent or you sit back. You try to make it even better. And when you do fail because it's inevitable that you will, you've got to remember what it was that got you success.

I remember my first year in charge, we had an absolutely torrid time on the field and the business was not in good shape.

**SA:** *And if you could pull out one or two things you did during that time to keep things on track, what would they be?*

**RL:** Being true to myself and most importantly being true to the business. Being prepared to do what I thought was the right thing and that meant moving certain people out as quickly as possible. It was a high risk strategy because I didn't have the people to bring in. I just knew I had to do it.

When you move people out you have to shoulder more and more responsibility until you can get the right people in place to take the organisation forward. It's one of the toughest things one has to do because there is always a hiatus. If you are moving senior people out of an organisation and you haven't identified the new people coming in, that is high risk.

I think that has to be the most significant thing I've done over the last two years. The main factor in our success this last year has been having the right people come in, and working with the existing people.

I didn't bring success: it was delivered by other people. What I did was bring in the right people and move the wrong ones out. Now my job is to convince everyone we are heading in the right direction. And also to get them to challenge me to make sure it is the right direction.

It's not only about getting people internally to understand, believe in, and support what we are doing. We have to convince people outside of the organisation too. Quite often organisations can be more influenced by the external world than the internal world.

**SA:** *In looking back is there anything you've learned that has made you think differently, that you would tell your younger self?*

**RL:** Listen more. I think there's always a danger when you are ambitious and want to take things forward that you don't do enough listening. I've learned to be more rigorous in my understanding of situations. I like the old adage 'seek first to understand before you seek to be understood'.

When you are young you can be impetuous. You perhaps don't listen or analyse as you should. You're perhaps more intuitive. At the same time you do need the energy and the drive to take you forward and you have to take risks. However sometimes the risk is more intuitive than it should be.

Another thing I've learned is that people approach the world very differently from one's self. We should never assume that everyone sees the world, the organisation, and work in the way that we do.

I'm still learning that we all express our views of the world in different ways but that doesn't necessarily mean it's all right or all wrong. It's about understanding how you leverage that in a positive way.

If I could have learned anything faster, it would be a greater awareness of people. Because of the positions I've held there's a danger I could become very self-centred. So often I've resorted to my own logic when I've been driving things along, and I should have been far more empathetic and sympathetic.

**SA:** *From what you're saying there, it seems to me that you've always believed in keeping yourself sharp. You are clearly very aware of a need to always be learning.*

**RL:** Oh you've got to. I actually enjoy it – I find it hugely stimulating. When I lose that desire I think that's the time for me to retire.