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Leaders need precision and practice

INTERVIEW
JOHN RYAN

Linda Anderson talks to the head of CCL, the nonprofit leadership school

Leadership is always in demand, says John Ryan, head of the Center for Creative Leadership.

"And never more so than in crisis, challenge and turbulent times, such as at the moment," he adds with his eye on the current volatile economic climate.

CCL's attendance figures support his assertion. Last year 2,000 companies and more than 21,000 participants passed through its doors and the company has seen revenues climb from \$60.7m in 2004 to a projected \$88.6m for 2008.

CCL was founded in 1970 in Greensboro, North Carolina in the US as a non-profit institution focusing on leadership education and research. It now has more than 500 faculty members and staff at five campus locations – three in the US, in Greensboro, Colorado and California – and in Brussels and Singapore. Its mission is to foster creative leaders – those who surpass the expected by thinking and acting beyond traditional boundaries.

Mr Ryan, 62, is the sixth president of CCL, taking over the position last year.

He is quick to dismiss the old adage that leaders are born, not made – he accepts that some find it harder than others to learn, but maintains that leadership is like sporting skill.

"The more you practice, the more you think about it [leadership] the better you get," he says.

Mr Ryan is no stranger to positions of authority. He has served as chancellor of the State University of New York, president of the State University of New York Maritime College



Challenge in a crisis: 'We try to practise continuous dissatisfaction' Bruno Vincent

and as superintendent of the US Naval Academy.

But, it was only after having held 11 leadership positions that he went through a leadership programme himself – Leadership at the Peak – a CCL programme for senior executives to evaluate their leadership style and effectiveness that he says increased his self-awareness and helped him appreciate how one can always strive to improve one's effectiveness as a leader.

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"[At CCL] we are always trying to be better," he adds. "We try to practise continuous dissatisfaction."

Mr Ryan traces the roots of his interest in leadership to the Naval Academy, where he trained to be a pilot on the advice of his father, having initially considered Princeton University.

To earn his wings he had to land his fighter jet on an aircraft carrier.

"Although I had doubts, I had trust in my coach," he says. He made a precision landing, earned

his wings and had an illustrious 35-year career in the military.

It is a combination of elements rather than any single factor that makes a good leader, says Mr Ryan.

A good leader fosters a culture of innovation in the workplace and embraces collaboration as the quickest way to improve.

Authenticity is also essential: "Someone who not only says the right things, but does the right things within the context of their own personality," he adds. "You want people to trust you – it is what allows you to be a leader in many respects."

A further vital ingredient is what Mr Ryan dubs "the servant leader" – someone interested in the personal growth of the employees within the company. He blames many of today's corporate failings on this.

"If your leaders are not worried about you [the employee], then they are not worried about the right things."

Learning agility also plays a role. Mr Ryan states that although leadership skills are transferable, they must be applied in context – when a leader fails to do this successfully, it is because he or she lacks self-awareness, he adds.

He accepts that CCL needs to listen to its own advice. In the past he believes, the centre had too much of an inward focus, but

it is now paying more attention to its clients, "listening to their needs and providing solutions".

One aspect of this refocus on customers is the centre's leadership development programme, which aims to give organisations the "leadership they need to make the changes necessary to implement their strategies".

"We have moved into it because of demand from our clients. We think it will go a long way in helping businesses sustain themselves," says Mr Ryan.

With more than 400,000 alumni, CCL is already well known. In addition to international expansion through its centres in Brussels and Singapore, CCL is also considering partnerships with two leading business schools.

CCL aims to operate at the cutting edge, he adds: "Giving our clients challenges that exceed their personal envelope, giving them confidence so that they are really challenged beyond their personal comfort level."

There will always be a demand for leaders he says and it is not easy to change one's behaviour. But for developing leadership skills, CCL can help.



CCL-Asia

Telephone: +65 6854 6000
E-mail: cclasia@ccl.org

CCL-Europe

Telephone: +32 (0)2 679 0910
E-mail: ccl.europe@ccl.org

CCL-North America

Telephone: +1 336 545 2810
E-mail: info@ccl.org