



Taking the lead

EX-US NAVY PILOT AND ACADEMIC JOHN R. RYAN HAS TAKEN OVER AS PRESIDENT AND CEO OF THE CENTER FOR CREATIVE LEADERSHIP, ONE OF THE WORLD'S TOP LEADERSHIP TRAINING INSTITUTIONS. HE TALKS TO **GEORGE BICKERSTAFFE**.



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John Ryan (above) took over as head of the Center for Creative Leadership in summer 2007 (he served on the CCL board from 2002). Before that, from 2005 he was Chancellor of the State University of New York (SUNY), the largest comprehensive system of higher education in America with 64 campuses, over 80,000 faculty and staff, and more than 400,000 students.

Previously, Ryan, a former US Navy pilot and Vice Admiral, served for seven years as president of three different institutions of higher education: the State University of New York Maritime College; interim president of the University at Albany, a doctoral institution with 17,000 students where he famously lived in the student dormitory during his presidency and donated the first three months of his salary for student scholarships at Maritime and Albany; and the US Naval Academy in Annapolis.

Ryan graduated from Annapolis in June 1967 with his twin brother Norbert Ryan Jr, also a former Vice Admiral. He received a Master of Science in Administration from George Washington University in 1975.

The Center for Creative Leadership was begun in 1970 by H Smith Richardson Sr, founder of the Vick Chemical Co, and the Smith Richardson Foundation Inc provided its initial financial underpinning. The Foundation — and several generations of the Richardson family — have remained generous supporters of CCL's work, which aims at promoting leadership through courses and programmes for individuals and organisations as well as research and publications dedicated to leadership issues. CCL's European headquarters is in Brussels under the leadership of Rudi Plettinx.

How would you define “leadership”? And why is it important?

I think effective leadership involves at least three key components: setting direction, creating alignment and gaining commitment. It's important that leaders set a direction and then encourage people to follow in that direction. The best people do it well and others not so well.

What people most want in a leader is someone who is authentic, who they can trust. People now are educated, intelligent and well read and they see through people who are maybe not as genuine as they should be. Authentic leaders start with the courage of their convictions – they're not holding polls or taking surveys. They obviously listen to people's views and integrate them but they also have to set the vision and the direction. They have to understand what direction their particular organisation needs to go in.

Is "creative" leadership different?

Creative leadership involves people thinking beyond the boundaries that limit individuals and organisations and if you think about that it extends beyond the typical skills that are associated with routine leadership. Business schools teach people how to analyse data, coach employees, run projects and so on but at CCL we try to go beyond that and teach people to be innovative. And we do that through three elements: assessment, challenge and support. The unique thing about CCL is that we have been doing that since we were founded in 1970; we have been focussed on it for the last 37 years.

What is the thinking and emphasis behind your new initiative, Advancing Global Leadership?

People who are involved in global leadership positions are today facing greater complexity in their roles, whether it's at the mid-level or higher in their organisations. And they need to be able accurately to perceive new situations they face, culturally as well as organisationally, with the people they interact with, and they have to adapt their leadership style accordingly.

What we're trying to do with Advancing Global Leadership is a three-phase approach. Every AGL session involves participants in three locations: Brussels, Singapore and America. Prior to the programme, participants complete a set of assessments and will work on an assignment with their cross-continent learning partners. Everyone will leave with an action plan for addressing his or her global leadership challenge and will have the opportunity to continue working with a coach to apply what he or she has learned.

What do you think the programme's impact will be?

We were very encouraged. We've just finished our first AGL and there were 40 people involved globally with about 15 in both Brussels and Singapore and it was a great exercise. We really opened up the eyes and imaginations of people who were managing the tensions and opportunities between headquarters and local needs.

It's the type of thing that happens every day around the world. What we're trying to do is help men and women prepare for those kinds of opportunities. You know as well as I that both in Europe and America, and to a lesser extent in Asia, that whether we call it right-sizing, down-sizing or up-sizing we have taken away a lot of the middle-management opportunities in organisations where people could grow and develop these kind of skills as a leader. And so as we get ready to lose my generation of baby boomers we have another generation that needs experience that it cannot now get in the workplace and so we are offering it through the AGL.

Is globalisation creating a need for a different set of leadership skills, a different sort of leader?

Yes. This is my third career. I was in the military, then ten years in academia and now in a not-for-profit organisation. All of them had many overseas challenges for me.

I would say that leaders today have to be, number one, more self-aware, number two more culturally aware and number three be able to learn on the job, be continuous learners. And that's ever-more true in this global society we are all part of.

Do you believe that business takes leadership seriously enough?

Only the best businesses. Let me put it this way. One of my mentors and heroes was



To be a good leader you have to commit to it, practise it, want to do it, read about it, look for a mentor or a coach, go to a programme like CCL and then practise those skills. Behaviours are very important in becoming a leader



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The number of years CCL has been focussed on innovative and creative leadership

Peter Drucker. He used to say that a leader has three responsibilities. First, he or she is responsible for direct results. I don't think there are many business people who don't understand that.

Where they fall down is in the second two things that Peter always talked about. He said that leaders are responsible for enhancing and sustaining the culture they are part of. And the third thing, which I think is becoming more and more important, is what we call talent management. All of us have to be on the look-out for new talent. And it's not just about finding the right men and women for your organisation – it's about keeping those you already have.

You have been President and CEO of CCL for a relatively short time. What plans do you have to increase its influence and effectiveness?

We will be concentrating on two broad areas. First, I think we are the best in the world on individual leadership development. We have some great programmes and we are going to continue those. The other area we are moving onto is more customised programmes and what I would call corporate leadership development. There I think we will focus on three broad areas: strategic planning, corporate culture, and talent management and “sustainment”, a term that encompasses not only talent recruitment and development but also retaining talent for the long term.

We also want to be more international than we are. Last year we had 21,000 individual leaders we worked with and over 3,000 organisations in about 120 different countries. But a particular focus for us now is expanding our operations in Europe and Asia. One of my mandates from my board of governors is to touch more lives globally. We have been nominally a global organisation but in my opinion in the past we have been too focussed on North America and that's not the way ahead for us.

You personally have a military background. Is that an important influence in your own conception of leaders and leadership?

I think the military is just another opportunity for leadership – though it probably comes at an earlier age. I graduated from Annapolis as a pilot and I was leading 50 people basically as soon as I was out of school. But in the military you also learn how to be a follower. And I think you are more sensitive and aware as a leader if you have been a follower – you know what it's like to take orders or to have someone else directing the action.

I don't think military leadership is different to business leadership. But when you're in a combat situation or you are away from your family for six months I think that gives you a different perspective on perseverance or what real adversity is. But you don't need to be a military person to be a great leader; there are plenty of military people who are lousy leaders.

You describe leadership potential as a “muscle” that needs exercise to develop. What is the best sort of exercise?

First of all, you have to commit to it. You can't be a leader if you're not going to work at it, practise it. You don't become a good football player unless you practise and you don't become a good leader unless you practise. The best way to become a leader is to want to do it, to read



about it, look for a mentor or a coach, go to a programme like CCL and then practise those skills. Behaviours are very important in becoming a leader.

You have identified Colin Powell as a great leader in modern times. Who do you think is the greatest in history?

It's a bit North American-centric but to me two people stand out. One is Abraham Lincoln. He was a man who was capable of bringing into his cabinet people who had absolutely opposed him before, who said he wasn't fit to be President even. I admire him because he did his homework, he led by example, and he had great character.

Then there is a woman who you don't often hear talked about as heroic or a great leader and that's Eleanor Roosevelt. She was born into a wealthy family but was orphaned when she was ten and had a terrible childhood. She became the person who really started the Civil Rights movement and the women's rights movement. She had tremendous compassion for the poor and she helped the entire world. She was chair of the UN committee that drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. What I really admire is that she didn't take opinion polls to see what people thought about there, she just did what she thought was right.