Relationships not leadership sustain successful organisations

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ABSTRACT  For over a century, managers and academics have been captivated by the relationship between organisational leadership styles and success. The quest to uncover the secret of successful leadership remains, however. Academics have debated the attributes of various leadership styles and the feasibility of training leaders. Today, the literature is suggesting the concept of leadership throughout the organisation, implying a move from ‘leaders and followers’ to leaders as inspirational players. This paper will argue that the success of an organisation is vested in the formation of sustainable relationships with the primary purpose of leadership being to influence the feelings and emotions of those associated with the organisation; to create the emotional heart of the organisation and thus to determine the tenor of the relationships between the people inside and outside the organisation.

RELATIONSHIPS OR LEADERSHIP FOR SUCCESS?

For over a century, managers and academics have been captivated by the relationship between organisational leadership styles and success. Yet today we remain captured by the military metaphors of General Claus von Bertalanffy which formed the foundation for the command and control style structures introduced by Max Weber at the turn of the 19th century. The Art of Warfare, by Sun Tzu remains a popular management text, together with a host of other books and articles which analyse the leadership styles of ‘successful’ leaders including Jack Welch, Anita Roddick, Steve Jobs, Norman Schwartzkoff and many other prominent leaders.

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successful leadership, however, remains. Academics have debated the attributes of various leadership styles and the feasibility of training leaders. Today, the literature is suggesting the concept of leadership throughout the organisation implying a move from ‘leaders and followers’ to leaders as inspirational players. This paper will argue that the success of an organisation is vested in the formation of sustainable relationships, with the primary purpose of leadership being to influence the feelings and emotions of those associated with the organisation; to create the emotional heart of the organisation and thus to determine the tenor of the relationships between the people inside and outside the organisation.

An organisation, whether public or private, large or small, is no more than a group of people who have come together for a specific purpose, and their interactions dictate performance. Organisations are learning that the difference between winning and losing can be attributed to the power of relationships and not the strategy or associated systems and processes. Historically, the CEO issued directives and orders through a chain of command. Orders were implemented without question in an environment where initiative and inspiration were actively discouraged, yet it is now recognised that inspiration and innovation are the key to knowledge creation. But knowledge is created through conversation and by sharing information, a process that can only occur in an environment where the value system is based on trust and integrity, not on blind obedience. The challenge for the Chief Executive is to establish an environment that facilitates the development of sustainable relationships.

Traditional hierarchical organisations, with their functional silos, have the propensity to inhibit communication. Information is protected and success is defined by the ability of one silo to outperform the rest. Competition is internally focused. When an organisation rejects the silo mentality, a complex network of relationships emerges. Although these relationships do not have to be formally managed, an environment must be created to encourage their growth, and the Chief Executive plays a critical role in facilitating the development of these relationships and networks.

Figure 1 shows the structure of the Waikato Management School within the University of Waikato. The Dean, although central to the organisation, is also isolated from the organisation with his position being buffered from the operating units by the senior management group. The dashed lines in Figure 1 indicate the relationships the MBA Director must nurture to ensure the effective and efficient operation of the MBA programme. These are only the internal relationships, and a further set of complex relationships exists with other areas of the university and external clients. If all the school’s communication relationships were plotted on one chart, the result would be more complex than a spider’s web. But it is this complex network of relationships that allows the organisation to function, a network which is founded on information sharing and high levels of trust.

While the Dean is pictured at the centre of the organisation with primary relationships focused on the senior management team, the Dean is likely to interact with many other managers in the organisation. As a leader, the Dean will use his skills and experience to drive the organisation forward. But if the leader is unable to interact effectively with his staff, the organisation will not succeed. The theory of emotional intelligence argues that the leader’s mood is
Figure 1
Relationships with the MBA Director in the Waikato Management School

BMS  BeComm  BCS  B.Tour  Diploma  Graduate  PhD

Marketing & IM
SM & L
Communication
Accounting
Econ, Finance and Tourism
MIS

Qualification Convenors
Chairpersons
ED: International
ED: PR and Marketing
ED: Research
Dean
Senior management group

ED: Technology
ED: Exec Education

Dir MBA
Dir In-house
Dir Short Course
Course Coordinators
Prog Manager
Knowledge Manager
Tech Mgrs
Grad
Int
Corporate
Student
U’grad
Maori
Support

Relationships not leadership
contagious and spreads through the organisation. This may not be always true, however, since the senior management team can shield the rest of the organisation from any negative emotions that may be exhibited by the CEO. In Microsoft, Bill Gates has a reputation for ‘not tolerating fools lightly’, and it is possible to conclude that his management style is likely to evoke negative feelings in those who interact with him. Yet Microsoft is a successful organisation. A possible explanation is that the senior management team shields the rest of the organisation from any negative emotions that may be exhibited by their CEO, but transmit the wisdom of the CEO to the rest of the organisation in a positive manner.

In the following section, the reader is introduced to the Atlanta Braves (Gilson et al., 2001), the most successful baseball club of the 1990s, and yet, in the 1980s, the Atlanta Braves were one of the worst performing teams in the baseball league. This story will be used to illustrate the impact of positive relationships in an organisation, and the remainder of the paper will explore how an organisation can create the future by developing sustainable relationships based on a shared purpose.

THE ATLANTA BRAVES STORY: SUCCESS THROUGH COMMITMENT

When Ted Turner purchased the Atlanta Braves in 1981, the team was one of the weakest teams in the National Baseball League. Victories were unknown and losing permeated the organisation. Turner appointed Stan Kasten as the in-house legal council for the Braves with the mandate to turn the organisation around. Despite the ‘advice’ he was receiving, Stan became committed to the people in the organisation and developed a strategy to revitalise the organisation and invigorate the team:

‘The main challenge for me in my first 60 to 90 days was really getting a hold of who should stay and who should go. There were lots of rumours from the outside — some people often got a lot of the blame from the newspapers which affected my mindset going in — one guy in particular, who I thought must be at fault. After 90 days I learnt, to the contrary, he was very good. He became a star in the industry. The first thing a lot of people told me what to do when I walked in, was to get rid of this guy, but although we did replace some people, we kept almost everybody there. We focused on them, and gave them the challenge of building from the bottom up, and it was a lot more fun for everyone. It gave them some breathing room, because everyone would like to do it that way if they were ever given the chance — start from scratch and build from the bottom up.’ (Gilson et al., 2001: 167)

Later, Kasten was to appoint John Schuerholz as General Manager who arrived in Atlanta ‘with an unrelenting, uncompromising total commitment to creating a first class organisation’ (Gilson et al., 2001: 170). The challenge was daunting as Schuerholz describes:

‘It was an organisation that, in the eyes of the industry, was simply floundering administratively — it didn’t seem to have any direction. The development plan for the team was working but administratively it was as though there was no continuity and no clear plan for how the organisation was going to function. The biggest stumbling block was apathy. There really wasn’t a sufficient energy level, either individually or collectively with the administrative staff. They were beaten down. Apathy had taken a stranglehold and people didn’t think they needed to care, because no matter how much they did, it wouldn’t change anything.’ (Gilson et al., 2001: 171)

The challenge was addressed by building
We did that through communication with the various department heads and through group meetings. We talked about how we were going to redefine this organisation, how we were going to establish new and higher goals. We did that, we talked about what the goals were, and about how we would reach them. Then, more than anything else, we empowered the staff who were already here, who were previously viewed as non-productive and not very talented to make this plan work. Through communication with them and considerable exchange of ideas, thoughts and emotions, we began to create a very effective organisation.

(Gilson et al., 2001: 171)

His work ethic was unrelenting and uncompromising, yet his passion was infectious. Schuerholz was seen as trustworthy, honest and up-front, energetic, supportive, friendly and fun loving. He was tenacious and challenging yet people oriented. He assumed personal responsibility and was professional in his approach. He provided purpose and passion to the staff by taking an interest in and involving himself with their challenges and tasks. He was the consummate coach. But he alone did not transform the Braves. From Turner and Kasten at the top of the organisation to Amy Richter, the director of advertising, from Hank Aaron the star of the 1970s to Bobby Cox the inspirational pitcher of the 1990s, inspirational players permeated the organisation.

The approach adopted by John Schuerholz was simple. He had come to Atlanta to achieve a personal challenge. He was going to build a winning organisation. More importantly, once he arrived he told all the staff what he was going to do, since they were the conduit for the realisation of his dream. Such an approach was an anathema to many of the staff. Traditionally, the General Manager stayed in his office and did not mix with the operational staff.

The challenge was evident, to make the Braves the premier professional baseball organisation and, by 1989, the dream had been achieved. Tom Glavin, the ‘on field’ pitching star, recalls how Schuerholz achieved this turnaround:

‘We all sat down and talked, and the word commitment was used and used a lot. We decided right then and there that there was going to be a commitment from top to bottom to making this organisation a class organisation and a winning organisation. That started in 1990. It was simple things at first; the way you conduct yourself as a team, the way you go about your business. The next thing you know you’re winning ball games and getting all the respect that comes with that.’ (Gilson et al., 2001: 174)

John Schuerholz identified that the key to the Braves turnaround lay in restoring a sense of pride within the staff. He demonstrated a commitment to excellence, he shared his dream, he shared his passion by being a consummate communicator, he motivated those around him, and he had time for everybody. He built trust and respect within the organisation.
Schuerholz established his integrity and gained the loyalty of the staff. His passion and commitment became infectious. People started to communicate. While Schuerholz was the leader, he was also the catalyst that caused the organisation to be the best it could be.

**LEADERSHIP THROUGHOUT THE ORGANISATION**

John Schuerholz is not a charismatic leader but an individual who built an organisation founded on trust and integrity, allowing a complex web of relationships to develop. Similarly, Frank Williams is the titular head of Williams Formula One but it is his enthusiasm and motivation that inspires others in the organisation:

‘There is so much respect for Frank and Patrick, because of what they have done, and in particular, how they haven’t always toed the party line — they have bucked the trend. They have done it because of their desire and their passion of motor racing and that filters through to all of the people who work here … This is something very special that you probably wouldn’t get anywhere else. Frank and Patrick have enormous respect for all the 360 people who work here.’ (Jane Gorard in Gilson et al., 2001: 32)

The names of the late Sir Peter Blake, Russell Coutts and Tom Schnackenberg are synonymous with Team New Zealand, together with Alan Sefton, Dean Barker and every member of the organisation right down to the office junior. Peter Blake insisted that everybody in the organisation is important and can make a contribution to improve boat speed.

‘This includes not only the sailing crew, but also the shore manager and the secretary, designer, boat builder, sail maker, ie the whole team. Everyone has to buy in. There are no small jobs. Everyone is important. Every person’s input is valued and all ideas are welcome. The finer details are outlined to everyone, because if you haven’t got trust you haven’t got anything.’ (Gilson et al., 2001: 224)

The word *leadership* has become synonymous with the CEO’s position, the one who leads the organisation, who sets the direction and envisages its destiny and much has been written to uncover the secrets of leadership. Are these great leaders ordinary people performing extraordinary feats or do they have some mystical talent, a rare gene that eludes most mere mortals? For a number of years, some writers opined that leadership skills could not be taught, leaders could not be trained. But today, the research is painting a much different picture.

‘Leadership is not the private reserve of a few charismatic men and women. It is a process that ordinary people use when they are bringing forth the best from themselves and others’ (Kouzes and Posner, 2000).

The work of Kouzes and Posner suggests

1. That credibility is the foundation of all leadership. In order to gain credibility the leader must first engage in a process of self-discovery, understanding and controlling their values, behaviours and dreams. Through this process of self-management empathy and authenticity emerge building the trust and confidence that others look for in a leader.
2. Leadership is everyone’s business. Leaders inspire, challenge, motivate and encourage and these characteristics are required throughout the organisation not just in the CEO’s office.
3. Challenge is the opportunity for greatness. Organisations cannot afford to take time out. They must keep moving, momentum is required and momentum
is derived from those who challenge the status quo.

4. Leaders focus on the future. Ambition and drive are linked to leadership, the focus on a direction in pursuit of a destiny.

5. Leaders are team players and the team spirit is built around trust.

6. The legacy you leave is the life you lead — the foundation for authenticity.

7. Caring is the heart of leadership. When people work with leaders who care about them and encourage their hearts, they feel better about themselves. These leaders set people’s spirits free, often inspiring them to be more than they ever thought possible.

8. Believing you can make a difference.

Clearly, these eight characteristics of leadership are not confined to the executive floor. They form a mantra to define the basis for building relationships in work and personal life.

The terms leadership and relationship are connected, since one cannot occur without the other. The dictionary defines leadership as exercising authority in a social group and relationships as ‘the way two or more people affect each other; feelings that are aroused in mutual dealings’. A leader must work in a group, and effective leaders are those who elicit positive feelings in the members of the group. But feelings are derived from emotions. Thus effective leaders must be able to create positive emotions within the group, they must be able to interpret and respond appropriately to the emotions of those around them.

To understand the emotions of others, one must first understand one’s own emotions, what they mean and the behaviour they create. How one knows and handles one’s own and others’ emotions has formed the basis of much research in psychology, and the term ‘emotional intelligence’ has been popularised by Daniel Goleman. His first book, *Emotional Intelligence* (1996), takes a reader on a voyage of discovery to bring greater understanding to some of the more perplexing moments in life, demonstrating how emotions have an impact on thoughts and the decision-making processes. He argues that people who excel, who create relationships that flourish, have a clear understanding of their own emotions and others around them. In his latest work (Goleman et al., 2002), he demonstrates the link between the leadership style and performance within an organisation. While management by fear can create tensions that may produce the desired result in the short term, it is unlikely that success will be sustained, whereas leaders who create a trusting, open environment where information is shared create a sustainable organisation that can rise to any challenge.

**EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND INSPIRATIONAL PLAYERS**

The initial research into peak-performing organisations was not grounded in empirical research. A story-telling methodology was employed, allowing those interviewed to reveal the components of success. The researchers had no predetermined concepts, and each interview was started with the single question: ‘Why do you keep on winning?’ Themes emerged and, from these themes, the theory of peak performance was derived; but this was only the beginning. The initial theory missed the fundamental factor for success — the importance of relationships. ‘Inspirational players’ were identified as a unique characteristic of these organisations. The authors stated that inspirational players permeated these organisations, and then went on to build the model. Perhaps, the authors were
fixated by the need to create their own model. The weakness of the model was its inability to place the inspirational players into a box and show their relationship to the other components of peak performance. While the model describes the elements required to establish an environment to create flow and the associated behaviour necessary for sustainability, it does not explain the nature of the relationships between the individuals within the organisation which drive the model. The how had been identified but not the why.

The term ‘inspirational players’ was chosen to ensure there was no confusion with charismatic leadership and to move the reader away from a concept of leadership that implies the creation of followers. The definition of inspirational players indicated that these individuals could be found throughout the organisation. Inspirational players were described as confident individuals who are perceived to be reflective thinkers and possess a fearsome intellect. They are idea catalysts, energetic, tenacious, with a passion for work. They can mobilise people, they coach and are emotionally involved with the industry. Inspirational players can get the best from everybody; they are people orientated and have time for everyone. They are problem solvers and focused yet fun loving and jovial. These are the characteristics and competencies that every HR manager dreams of and that every recruitment agency searches for.

These characteristics are the drivers of commitment and are the competencies used to define an individual’s level of emotional intelligence:

‘Emotional intelligence is observed when a person demonstrates the competencies that constitute self-awareness, self management, social awareness and social skills at appropriate times and ways in sufficient frequency to be effective in the situation.’ (Boyatzis et al., 2001)

Emotional intelligence is not a single construct but an inventory of competencies that can be organised into five clusters (see Table 1). Analysis of the cases from the peak performance study revealed a number of descriptors or characteristics exhibited by inspirational players. In Table 2, these have been classified into the five clusters that define emotional intelligence.

In ‘Primal Leadership’ Goleman et al. argue that a leader’s mood and accompanying behaviour is a potent driver of business success:

‘High levels of emotional intelligence … create climates in which information sharing, trust, healthy risk taking and learning flourish … emotional intelligence is carried through an organisation like electricity through wires. To be more specific, the leader’s mood is quite literally contagious, spreading quickly and inexorably throughout the organisation.’ (Goleman et al., 2002: 44)

The story of the Atlanta Braves demonstrates how the moods and behaviour of John Schuerholz were transmitted throughout the organisation and how Schuerholz acted as a catalyst to transform the Atlanta Braves into the ‘winning team’ of the 1990s. Through communication, sharing emotions and building self-esteem, John Schuerholz transformed the Braves. The power behind the transformation began with the commitment that Schuerholz had towards the Atlanta Braves. When he was approached to suggest a potential General Manager for the Braves, he was already the successful manager of the Kansas Royals, an organisation he had been with for 23 years.

‘I have to be honest with you. At the moment when he (Stan Kasten, President of
Kauffman gave me that little push and I was on my way. (Gilson et al., 2001: 169)

Schuerholz was emotionally committed to transforming the Braves. He possessed both the skills and the confidence to tackle the challenge. His levels of self-awareness and self-management were high: his ability to recognise his own emotions and his ability to control and understand his emotional state. On arriving in Atlanta, Schuerholz found an organisation that was floundering, where individual self-respect was lacking and apathy ruled. He did not embark on a programme of redundancies, but worked with the existing staff, demonstrating honesty and integrity by sharing his dream, his vision, his values with those around him. He was the consummate

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**Table 1 The five emotional intelligence clusters**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Clusters</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The self-awareness cluster</td>
<td>Self-confidence, Self-assessment, Emotional awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The self-regulation cluster</td>
<td>Adaptability, Conscientiousness, Trustworthiness, Self-control, Innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The motivation cluster</td>
<td>Achievement driven, Commitment, Initiative, Optimism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The empathy cluster</td>
<td>Understanding others, Commitment, Initiative, Optimism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The social-skills cluster</td>
<td>Leadership, Communication, Influence, Teamwork and collaboration, Change catalyst, Conflict management, Building bonds, Developing others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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the Braves) said that, the light bulb went on. I said to myself “this is pretty startling” and I began to build some interest in the position myself, but I also made some recommendations of other people, then contemplated that internal feeling about this being of interest to me. Then I talked to my wife about it and decided to pursue it. The Royals Organisation gave me permission to talk with the Braves. We talked and ultimately they offered me the job. Then the time came for the big decision, needless to say it was a difficult decision. I vacillated between accepting and rejecting the Braves position. Finally, it was our owner in Kansas City, Mr Ewing Kauffman who said “if you are interested enough to even entertain going, you need to go and satisfy yourself and to take this opportunity”. So once I got past that decision emotionally, I was ready to dive head long into the challenge. Mr Kauffman gave me that little push and I was on my way. (Gilson et al., 2001: 169)
communicator. His dream, to turn the Braves into a world-class winning organisation, his values and his goals were accepted by those around him. Many of the staff had been with the Braves for ten or more years. Their passion and pride, which had been extinguished by the previous management, was about to be reignited. This passion was contagious and spread through the organisation. As staff became passionate (emotional) about the dream, they in turn acted as inspirational players for those around them, thus spreading the dream throughout the organisation.

An individual’s emotions are derived from values and beliefs, and trust between individuals is established when the group shares these values and beliefs. Schuerholz acted as a catalyst in providing a set of values and beliefs that were acceptable to the members of the organisation. He was able to harness individual values and beliefs to the dream of the organisation, thus creating an environment of trust, comfort and fairness.

By being attuned to the feelings of the staff at the Atlanta Braves, John Schuerholz was able to establish an emotional connection by empathising with their past and providing staff with a vision for the future. These are the characteristics of the inspirational player, self-awareness, self-management and empathy, which provide the foundation for managing relationships, the key criteria for managing a successful organisation (see Figure 2).

**BUILDING AN EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT PEAK-PERFORMING ORGANISATION**

Proponents of emotional intelligence theory suggest that a CEO with high levels of emotional intelligence will lead successful organisations. Positive emotions will then flow throughout the organisation. By combining this research
with the work on peak-performing organisations, the suggestion is made that, while emotional intelligence may be a necessary condition for success, it is not a sufficient condition. The missing factor is the inspirational dream, the vision or purpose of the organisation. Writers, composers, athletes and individuals are inspired by their dream and driven by a consummate passion. Vision and mission have driven organisations for the past two decades,
but are these sufficient to generate passion at an individual level? In Built to Last, Collins and Porras (1997) suggest that successful organisations create a vision framework that encompasses a core ideology and an envisioned future. The core ideology or inspirational dream provides an enduring sense of belonging to and identity with the purpose of the organisation, while the envisioned future is described as something vivid and real yet a dream or aspiration. The core ideology provides the emotional link to the organisation, thus harnessing individual emotions to the purpose of the organisation.

Bill Sage, Chief Administration Officer of the US women’s soccer team, describes the dream of his team as:

‘The dream is two fold. First, to raise the awareness of women’s soccer throughout the world. Second, through the game of soccer, we want to be part of the worldwide social revolution, which sees women filling a different role in society. We see our women as ambassadors to do that. That is the global dream.’ (Collins and Porras, 1997: 29)

While the challenge of the team is to increase the awareness of women’s soccer, the inspirational dream is to be part of the worldwide social revolution, which sees women filling a different role in society. This statement provides the members of the organisation with an enduring sense of belonging, and its impact on the organisation is succinctly summarised by Julie Foudy, the co-captain of the US national women’s soccer team:

‘We want to leave a legacy, a mark in history, to show people what kind of passion we have for this sport. We’ve won World Cups and Olympic Gold Medals, but the dream of everyone on this team is that even when we take our leave, as we must do, we have left such a great legacy that future players and fans will always know that this didn’t happen by accident. This was something that was carefully calculated and it worked because of love and passion.’ (Gilson et al., 2001: 25)

The power of the inspirational dream is derived from the dream being adopted and internalised by each member of the organisation. The vision of the organisation and the values and aspirations of the individuals in the organisation have combined to create a shared passion. At this level of individual identity, members of the organisation are able to provide a commitment to the organisation that is consistent with their own values. The level of individual integrity is high, as is the level of trust between the members, generating a powerful passion to fulfil the dream.

Passion is exciting; it provides inspiration and creates a sense of adventure as the players in the organisation strive to fulfil the greatest imaginable challenge or envisioned future. Passion is contagious — it is the glue that binds the individuals into a close-knit and harmonious team.

Successes are celebrated and failures analysed to ensure that the organisation learns from the experience. Pride, humility and respect are evident between the people in these organisations creating a harmonious environment where nothing is impossible. The will to win is omnipresent.

The inspirational dream or core ideology is a statement designed to provide recognition and meaning for individuals in the organisation. It states the purpose of the organisation and provides the basis for the passion that drives the people in the organisation and inspires association from those outside. The dream is more than winning. The dream must possess intrinsic value, it should represent a cause and so extend the purpose of the organisation beyond shareholder returns to a meaningful raison
d’être for each member of the organisation. The Hockeyroos and US Women’s Soccer see their purpose as changing women’s role in society. The Chicago Bulls, Bayern Munich and Team New Zealand see their role as enhancing the local economy while the Australia Cricket Board is intent on inspiring the Australian nation. But not all inspirational dreams have to have a social cause. Williams F1 is purely motivational — the joy of speed — yet eminently inspiring.

Individual commitment to the inspirational dream provides the foundation for building emotional intelligence throughout the organisation. It is the catalyst that harnesses the values, dreams and aspirations of all members of the organisation, thus facilitating the development of harmonious relationships throughout the organisation. Trust, respect and fairness form the basis for relationships, a recipe designed for success that can be attributed to powerful relationships created through shared leadership.

LESSONS FOR MANAGERS

— Managers should be committed to the inspirational dream and be aligned to their own values and beliefs.

‘To thine own self be true and it must follow as the day the night thou cannot then be false to any man.’ (Anon.)

— Managers should understand and recognise the power of the dream and how it is governed by their own emotions.

— Managers should understand the perceptions, emotions and feelings of those around them.

— Managers should create an emotional connection to those around them and unleash the passion for the dream — sharing the dream.

— Managers should build pride in the organisation.

Through openness, honesty and integrity, an environment of trust, comfort and fairness will emerge, thus creating a harmonious family-like organisation. The outcome is an environment that facilitates ‘flow’; a calm coordinated environment that portrays an atmosphere of trust and harmony, where individual passions merge to create intensity and invincibility where anything is possible, when action and awareness merge, when there is total concentration on the task at hand and time passes unnoticed. This is chemistry that generates the essence of a sustainable and successful organisation.

REFERENCES


