

John Deffenbaugh blog – On becoming Eisenhower

Caterpillar has been in the news recently. Its Q1 results disappointed the market, and the chairman and CEO Doug Oberhelman (yes, in America, like Monitor, they combine the roles) blamed the soft international market.

Cat has done pretty well over the years though. Since 1925 they've only had one rough patch, in 1982 when they let Komatsu get the better of them. I declare an interest – my father worked for Cat, from when he left Kansas State in '38 to his retirement in '82. Cat is headquartered in Peoria Illinois, where I grew up. You don't get much more conservative than Peoria. I went back to a high school reunion recently, and it was like a time warp. There's a saying from Vaudeville about 'How it plays in Peoria' – you might recall that from the Nixon tapes.

Seeing as Cat is run by engineers, and with the mindset of Peoria, they tend to look after themselves. That means that their leaders come from within. They are, of course, an international company, so some of their leaders are non-American. Cat is not parochial, but they've never recruited from outside the company. They are also ruthless on performance. If you don't cut the mustard, then there's no progression. The CEO in 1982, Lee Morgan, took a long walk off a short plank. But their performance since makes them a 'bell weather' of the US economy.

What does this story tell us about the NHS, the 3rd largest employer in the world? The NHS is going through change. So? My first job in the NHS was in a training department in 1975, and there has been change ever since. There has also been leadership development since that time. Programmes galore, and a pool of leaders developed over the years.

No organisation such as Cat or the NHS is dependent on one leader, given the pool of resources available to the organisations. This was reinforced to me over recent weeks when working with NHS nurses on Leadership Academy programmes. The talent is there. If boards in the NHS think that they are limited in talent options, then there are some things that NHS leaders should do for themselves.

Talent pool – First, make sure you're on the radar screen. Someone higher up will have a little black book. Whether it's organisational, area, regional or national, there is someone aware of you. If they're not, then either you're not up to it, or you're not performing at the right level in the right way. There may, of course, be organisation politics at play, but they tend to come out in the wash. Eisenhower was a colonel in the regular army at the time of Pearl Harbor in 1941. By 1944 he was a 5-star general, Supreme Commander. In times such as this, boards will want to reach down 2 or 3 layers in the organisation for their leaders. Are you that leader, are you an Eisenhower?

Special projects – These things have a bad name in the NHS, used by boards and CEOs to put people out to pasture. This is not the case in business, where they're a way to show your metal, a way to the top. Special projects offer opportunities for creativity. As Maya Angelou, author and civil rights activist, observed, "You can't use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have." Boards and CEOs don't know the answers, and there is a greater probability you do. So set up a special project or get on one, get some sponsorship, and use your creativity to tackle that wicked problem.

CV – As the management guru Tom Peters put it, "Think CV". He also challenged leaders to ask themselves some key questions: "What is it that I do? What the hell is it that I've done? How do I know I've really done it? Whom among my customers will confirm it? What is the evidence that my skills are state of the art?" Success is based both on substantive achievement and behaviour, so show both.

You gotta look after yourself – get on some special projects so you're on the radar screen which gives you the evidence for the CV. There are many Eisenhowers out there in the NHS – are you one of them?

John Deffenbaugh 10 May 2013