

Leadership

Peter Blake was a good friend of mine. He was a great man; a leader, an inspiration, and someone who was fun to be around. I don't go looking to give speeches these days, but I'm pleased to talk about the Peter Blake Leadership Awards.

They are a fitting tribute to the man and they help keep alive some of the ideals that so animated him during his life.

Today, as the call is put out for nominations for this year's Blake Medal and the Blake Emerging Leader Awards, we ask ourselves again – what are we looking for? What is this quality they call leadership, of which Peter Blake clearly had a good supply?

First, let me start with some observations on Peter.

I don't need to tell you his life's story. But some things stand out for me.

First, his determination to take on the big challenges. There was no limit to Peter's ambitions.

He soon reached beyond the Waitemata Harbour and the neighbourhood of his childhood home at Bayswater. He was drawn to the thrills and perils of ocean racing in the great Whitbread challenges of the 1970s and 1980s.

His instinct was to seek the greatest prize in his field.

Second, he was tenacious. Through the 1970s and 1980s his efforts at the highest level met with constant failure. Most people in his situation would have given up. Not Peter.

He demonstrated one of the great virtues: the ability to overcome huge disappointment and keep going.

Of course, he couldn't do it on his own. Crucially, Peter had the ability to inspire confidence. Notwithstanding his early disappointments, he was able to convince hard-bitten businessmen like me, Douglas Myers and several others to back him, time and again.

We saw his passion and his potential.

Naturally, Peter's stature rose with the successes that came in the 1990s, starting with Steinlager 2's Whitbread victory in 1990 and leading to the America's Cup in 1995 and 1999.

Why did New Zealanders go as crazy as they did when Team New Zealand won in 1995?

At that time, after decades of failure and struggle, the country was just starting to see the economic rewards for all the painful economic reforms.

Just as the great wet blanket of economic stagnation was being removed, Peter and Team New Zealand achieved something remarkable – succeeding internationally in a field that tested sporting ability and courage but so much more.

Victory in the America's Cup required skill and sophistication in technology, design, finance and a host of other things for which, till then, New Zealand was not necessarily renowned. That comprehensive victory provided a moment for the nation to celebrate at a time in its recent history when it felt really good.

I just hope that Peter's America's Cup efforts don't go down in history as a one-off.

Which is why, I guess, we're here today: to do our bit to help encourage other leaders who have the potential to pull off achievements in Peter Blake's class.

We know that Peter was a great leader of men. He wanted to win and conveyed that desire to his crew, his designers, his financiers, his supporters and others in a way that compelled them to make greater efforts on his behalf.

That, in many ways, it seems to me is the essence of leadership. More of that later.

But there was more to Peter's efforts and leadership, beyond the cause of winning races. Through his life, a broader message evolved.

He wanted New Zealanders to lift their aspirations beyond the dross and petty rivalries of a small, isolated society to compete manfully against the best the world could throw at him. Why couldn't we succeed internationally or contribute at a global level at whatever we set our minds to?

He turned his attention to the environment and became an advocate not only of that specific issue, but of having passion itself – of getting off your arse and doing something significant.

Leadership is now something you can study at university. Every business school has programmes and groups devoted to the topic. The University of Auckland has the Excelerator, an institute led by Adjunct Professor Lester Levy, which is given over to the question of leadership.

I've always thought that leadership must be a difficult thing to teach, rather like entrepreneurial attributes. Some people are born entrepreneurs, although it seems also to be nurtured at home from infancy. As a result some people pick up instincts to buy and sell, and to have certain attitudes towards risk.

It's a very difficult thing to teach later in life, since it involves changing one's mindset and, often, one's deepest prejudices.

Leadership too is partly inherent. Just look at the playground – some kids rule the roost; others prefer to follow. Society wouldn't function if everyone wanted to be a leader.

Having said that, we can recognise certain qualities in leaders and encourage individuals who possess those qualities in embryonic form in the hope of nurturing and extending their leadership.

If someone is self aware, there's no reason why they can't improve on their inherited leadership abilities.

I'll give you my view on the qualities that we're looking for, though I don't claim it's in any way definitive or comprehensive. Leadership means a million things and different qualities make for successful leadership in different contexts and at different times.

In some senses it's an impossibly vague notion. "Show us some leadership" is a common cry hurled at politicians and public figures, which generally means do whatever the person making the call is advocating.

"Showing leadership" generally invokes the idea of a painful option. A leader will make the tough choice, risking short term pain for a higher purpose. Leadership, in that view, conjures up the idea of strength of resolve, which in some circumstances is clearly important. A leader will know his or her mind, and will hold firm.

Leaders often have charisma. But it's not necessary. Roger Douglas, to my mind, was a great leader because he made a difference.

He was a catalyst for change at a time when New Zealand desperately needed a group of individuals who were prepared to think beyond short term political calculation to advocate reforms that were necessary to get the country back on track.

But he couldn't really be described as a charismatic figure. He's no great orator; he's sometimes scruffily dressed.

I'm suggesting that great leaders are often great because they make a difference. The question then, is how do they make that difference? What is the special quality that leaders possess? I hinted at it earlier when describing Peter Blake.

The key to leadership, in most circumstances, is the ability to motivate others to get things done. People like Peter Blake have something about them that encourages others – their team mates, business colleagues, cabinet colleagues, family members, whoever – to do their utmost.

Leaders create a hold over others, in a positive sense. I read recently of the original Sir James Fletcher that his employees hated to let him down. That's a frequent observation about successful leaders.

They put so much of themselves into whatever cause they're pursuing that others feel bound to give their all in support. In essence, it's leadership by example.

Maybe there's an element of vulnerability there that people respond to – these leaders make it clear to everyone that the pain of failure for them would be so bad that their followers and supporters are moved to superhuman efforts to avoid it.

In most cases I suspect the flipside is more likely to be true: that great leaders can articulate the prize or object of their efforts so well, thereby making it so desirable, that their team or workforce will go the extra distance to attain it.

The ability to inspire and motivate people is, as we know, potent for good and evil. Stalin and Hitler were very effective leaders in one sense. The head of the local youth gang is also a leader of sorts.

Leadership ability on its own is no good if it's used to lead people down the wrong path.

So when we're looking for future leaders, we are looking first for people with sound values. What is it that a leader wants to achieve?

If its personal world domination, then we're probably justified in having some doubts.

If it's striving to make the world a better place, by providing goods or services that the public wants at a good price, by generating political policies that will improve the lot of ordinary citizens, or by

performing great sporting feats that will entertain, thrill and inspire others, then we can have cause for excitement.

The starting point, I suppose, for good leaders is caring.

Peter Blake said once in relation to his environmental campaigning, “It is vital to get people to understand the problems and make them realise it is not just for governments to control. It needs the average person to say enough is enough for the right informed reasons.”

We need people who want to make a difference; who pay attention to their own problems and desires, as we all should, and who are also able and willing to engage with broader issues.

One can sometimes get worried that too few people today think beyond themselves, but let’s hope the Blake Leadership Awards can flush a few more of them out to give us all hope.

One final observation. Above all, we expect great leaders to be successful. Whether potential leaders come to anything will depend on a host of things, including luck or circumstance.

We hear that ‘leadership is thrust upon someone’ by events. If the Second World War hadn’t come along, Churchill’s political career would have been one of comparative failure. He would never have had a chance to show his greatest leadership.

At several points Peter's career might have fizzled out if wind hadn't blown as strong, or had blown stronger, or if a funder hadn't come along at the right time. You've all probably heard that Napoleon would habitually ask, 'has he luck?' when trying to assess a man's probable practical value.

So, where have we got to? We're looking for people with strength of resolve, the ability to extract great effort from others, people with good, positive values who are prepared to engage with broader issues, and they will still need luck.

All the best at finding them.

I wish you well and commend all supporters of the Sir Peter Blake Trust. You do a great job to honour Peter.