

# Learning to be a born leader

*New work environment ups demands for leadership*

BY TIMOTHY RENSHAW

**T**wenty-first century business needs more than born leaders. It needs leaders at all levels and from all backgrounds. It needs them to cope with major shifts in company and marketplace dynamics brought on by the accelerated pace of change.

But cultivating leadership is complex.

As *Clear Leadership* author and SFU associate business professor Gervase Bushe will tell you, people don't learn to be leaders "through reading a book."

Subscribers to the born-leader theory will go that one better and argue that leadership can't be taught. But growth for organizations, communities and companies today requires that leadership be a teachable skill.

For example, budget cuts over the past decade have stripped layers of management from such public-sector behemoths as the Fraser Health Authority and its previous incarnations. The 22,000-employee health-care operation therefore needs to develop leadership at levels where it might not have been necessary in the past if it's to operate efficiently and effectively.

"People are being put into situations that very few have been in before," said Gabriele Cuff, a Fraser Health senior consultant for organizational development.

On the community front, Leadership Vancouver executive director David Holtzman said government downloading has accelerated the need to develop community leadership, an area that Leadership Vancouver has been spearheading over the past 13 years.

For companies such as Vancouver's Crys-

tal Decisions, cultivating leadership is a matter of survival. CFO Eric Patel explained that Crystal Decisions is searching for ways to develop people who can manage the complexity and speed of 21st-century change through relationships because the old methods of leadership by intimidation and top-down command chains have become increasingly ineffective.

Learning leadership, however, is not straightforward and it's not guaranteed. It requires the emotionally painful process of building a better person from the inside out.

The good news, according to Bushe and others in the field, is that key leadership skills can be taught, and more people have leadership abilities than commonly thought.

Bushe, who has helped develop SFU's new MBA in Leadership and Organizational Change program, and who teaches management training and corporate organizational change in the private sector, said old leadership methods that depended on cumbersome bureaucratic structures don't work anymore.

The microchip, he said, has so revolutionized the exchange of information that "trying to run anything of any size from the top is becoming impossible.... In the past we managed people through tasks and now we try to manage tasks through people."

So companies not only need more leadership from more areas, they need new leadership.

UBC Sauder School of Business professor Peter Frost said self-knowledge is critical for leaders today because they're in



charge of a followership that's more complex,

diverse and knowledge-based than it ever has been.

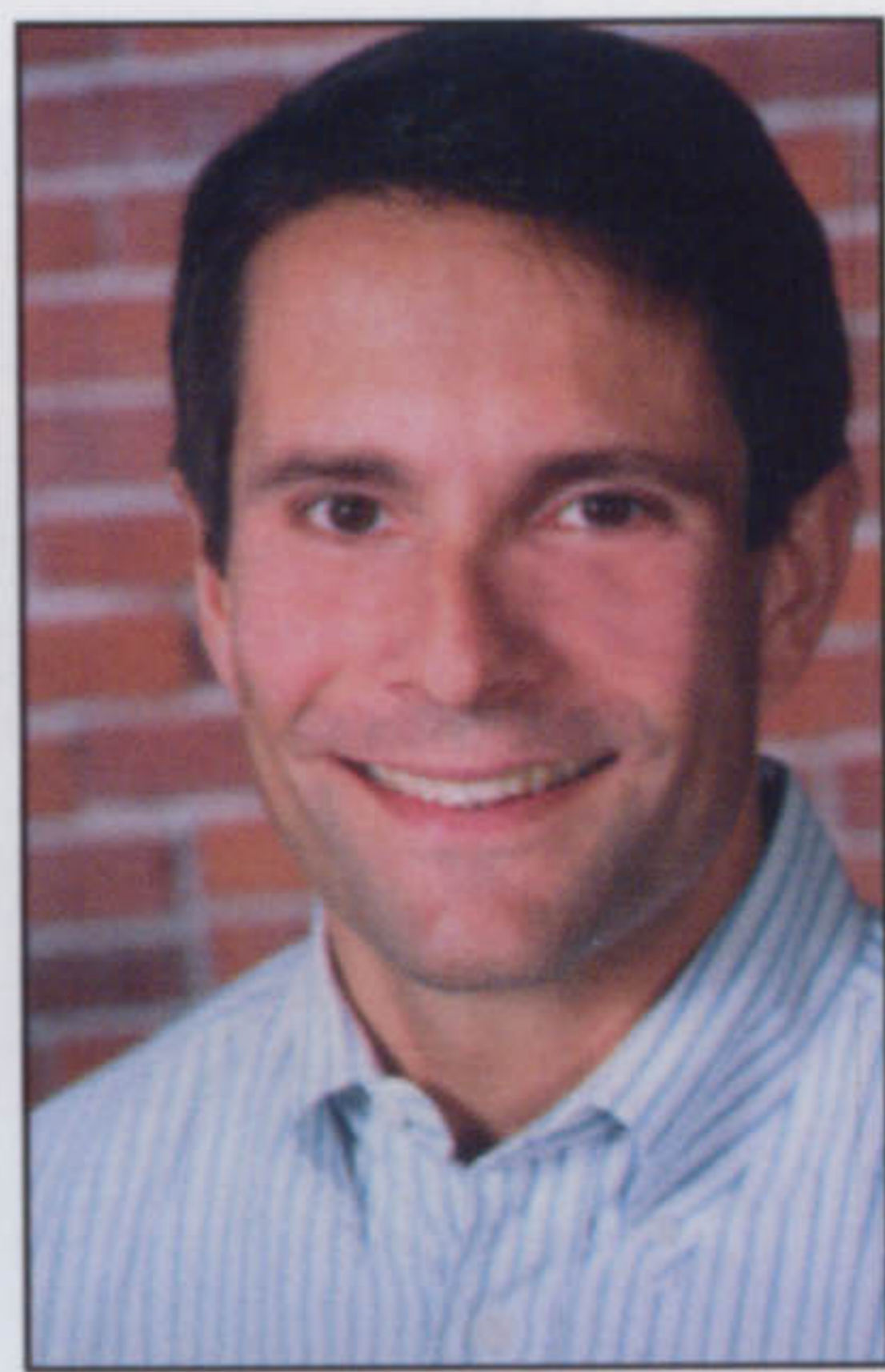
They must also, he said, be able to gauge the emotional and intellectual state of others. That requires a considerable investment of interpersonal resources from boardroom ranks. It also means sharing leadership responsibilities.

"One of the marks of a really good leader," said Frost, "is the quality of the people they surround themselves with... so that leadership is shared. A really good leader can be replaced, can let other people shine, can feel confident that they're being pushed themselves, as is the organization, by ideas that are as good as they can be."

But leaders still need to lead. The trick is to simultaneously cultivate connection and separation.

In the case of Crystal Decisions, retooling the company's leadership culture renewed the business-intelligence software provider and helped turn it from one of the worst-performing software companies four years ago to one of the best today.

CFO Eric Patel said the fundamental change required management to "look in the 'ugly mirror' and say, 'This stuff is broken. We have to fix it.' We weren't necessarily just looking for leadership training. We were looking to be consistently better leaders. Our CEO recognized that we needed



**Eric Patel: Top-down methods don't work**



to be better leaders and I think all of us would have agreed with that.”

Part of the leadership learning process involved sessions in Bushe’s White Water and Clear Leadership programs. They revealed critical shortcomings in communications, clarity of expectations and effectiveness of delegation.

Bushe’s clear communications principles were applied to dysfunctional company situations. The leadership light went on throughout Crystal Decisions, Patel said.

“It had a very profound impact on how we operated as a company and kept us going where we could keep the flywheel of performance turning faster and faster to the point where now — I won’t say the organization runs itself — but there’s a lot of power under the hood.”

Bushe said that for modern leaders to be effective they need to remain separate from others, yet connected to them. If they can’t meet that challenge, anxiety rules the corporate roost. And that’s bad, because anxiety and attempts to side-step issues that provoke it are a poor basis for major corporate decisions.

Various approaches can be used to teach people to make critical decisions in

the face of opposition and high anxiety.

Many involve experiential learning, what Bushe calls laboratory education. His White Water Leadership course, for example, immerses students in a simulated corporate environment undergoing rapid complex changes. They have to deal with the changes and their reactions to them.

“It’s a very behavioural form of learning,” Bushe said.

As Frost points out in his book *Toxic Emotions at Work*, organizational life is stressful and toxic. Leaders need to learn how to deal with those stresses and toxins to build better companies.

“If it’s safe, it’s not leadership,” Frost said.

“All leaders create pain. The really good ones know that. They feel it; they understand it; and they prevent it from becoming toxic by mitigating ahead of time or they know afterwards the need to mop it up.”

Bushe also uses psychotherapists in his programs. They can, he said, help a business leader get an understanding “of his neurotic structure... so he’s not making decisions out of his neurotic place. We start to see his blind spots, where he’s being pushed around by unconscious motiva-

tion. Then we teach him about how to tolerate his own anxiety in the face of uncertainty, ambiguity.”

Measuring the effectiveness of leadership training can be as difficult as the training itself. Leadership, as Frost points out, is often ahead of the curve. What appeared today to be a poor decision might turn out a year down the road to have been right on target.

Co-worker surveys of job effectiveness and performance before and after leadership training can show statistical shifts and provide snapshots of what a person has learned.

For Crystal Decisions, that training helped overhaul the company’s entire culture. “People came to a realization that some of the ways they were behaving were just not sustainable and not good things for the company,” Patel said.

But, as Bushe pointed out, “when it comes to being a better person, how do we grade you? And who gets to say what a better person is?”

Learning to be a leader is also an open-ended affair. You don’t graduate and then move on to something else.

“It’s not that you get it and you’re done,” Bushe said. “It becomes a journey. You get on the path.” ■