INTERVIEW WITH LIZ MELLON
Director Senior Executive Programme, Teaching Fellow, Organisational Behaviour, at the London Business School

Q.1
How did you make the transition from 'doing' to 'leading'?

There are three transitions I think that are terribly difficult for people to make and as a person who works with senior managers in their personal development, the three points to me are - at that first moment when you move from being a technical expert whatever it is, to being in charge of people for the first time - that's getting into management. The next very difficult transition is taking the hands off and stepping back far enough to be a leader. And the third really difficult transition is almost beyond that - it's becoming a member of the board, outside the organisation where really it's your advice, wisdom and counsel that comes back into the organisation. And each of those transitions are very difficult.

The particular difficulty in making the transition from being a manager to being a leader is simply letting go. It's getting your hands off the detail. It's actually being quite selfish, it's about taking time for yourself, to think about what you really believe in, what you stand for and how you're going to communicate that to other people so that you can't possibly tell them what to do, you're almost telling them how to be.

Q.2
Do you think leaders are born or made?

I could not possibly work as a leadership coach if I did not believe that leaders can be developed. I think the truth is that all of us have leadership capabilities but it takes a lot of courage to use them. I never ever say I teach leadership, I really don't believe it can be taught. I do believe it can be learned. I do believe it can be coached and I see my job as very simple - it's bringing out the best in people and that implies the best is already there, it's simply not being used to its full.

Q.3
Can anyone become a leader?

This is a very interesting question. I would say that people have it within themselves to become leaders, there's no doubt in my mind about that. The crucial thing is does the individual want to become a leader, is the motivation there? Because let's face it as a leader you are quite isolated very often, you are a figurehead. If there are things going right you'll get some credit, if things are going wrong you'll get the blame - it's quite a lonely place to be. You need a lot of courage and a lot of determination and basically you need to want it.

Q.4
Why is leadership important - why do organisations need leaders?

I like to think about this question the opposite way. Have you ever worked in an organisation where the leadership was not apparent - it was invisible, it was absent, maybe it was even negative? You think about the impact that had on you in your working life. Now you turn that around.

You think about someone who is inspiring in some way - not necessarily charismatic but engaged in what they're doing, passionate about it, wants to encourage you to become engaged in the same way, is supportive of you, thinks with you, not about today, not about tomorrow but about where the whole organisation is going. That's deeply moving, it's a very emotional engagement. I like to think of it this way: people work for money but they'll die for a cause.

Q.5:
How has leadership changed over the years?

From a research point of view the very interesting thing is that leadership hasn't changed. It's always been a battle between the kind of rational analysts who think that command and control works - 'if I tell you you'll do it, that's the end of the story' - and the human relations school which has always said 'people matter, you have to engage them at the level of their emotions, you work with them, encourage
their energy, harness that energy and achieve great things,’ so from the research point of view actually it’s not changed at all.

I think the way it has changed though is that, very crudely speaking, command and control no longer works. We’re seeing a younger generation growing up, not just in the UK but across the world, who don’t like to be told, they like to be excited about what they’re doing, they like to be energised. In that sense influencing and inspiring people has never been more important for a leader.

Q6
In what ways do you feel you have made a difference?

The two things I bring to this organisation are energy and commitment. When I take on a task or a project I believe in it 150%. I want to make it excellent, I work very hard at doing that. I try and engage with others so that they’re also inspired by what we’re doing, that they see the difference it makes, that they understand the contribution it makes and I put all my energy into it. I like to think it’s an exciting journey that we’re all on together.

Q7
On whom do you model your approach to leadership?

This is a kind of interesting question because actually if I think about it my role models are probably men. Now I wonder why! I don’t think there are enough women, visible women leaders around in the world, maybe that’s it. But I like people with passion and there are a couple of people who inspire me. One is an academic and former consultant called Tom Peters - a very well known guru in the business world - and if you see him speak he has you on the edge of his seat, he’s very passionate about what he does.

And the other person is actually a current CEO - John Chambers of Cisco, the second largest organisation in the world. He’s a multi-millionaire. I don’t admire him because he’s made lots of money. I admire him because he cares for each and every one of his staff and he engages with them from top to bottom in the organisation in a very personal way. He’s a fantastic, I’d love to work for him!

Q8
What are your strengths, the things you do well, the best thing about being a leader?

I’m going to come at this from a slightly theoretical point of view. I think the most important thing a leader can bring to an organisation - and I’m going to focus on one - is vision. Now many people are probably very tired of hearing about this ‘vision thing’ but I think it’s crucial and the reason I think it’s crucial is because the major forces for socialising individuals in the world are in decline. If you think about religion, if you think about the armed forces, if you think about governments, they are no longer the commanding influences in our daily lives that they used to be. Other forces are growing - like the media for example.

This means that a very important part of our daily life becomes work, what we do. It is much more interesting and engaging to work for an organisation where you believe you are making a bigger contribution than just whatever it is you are doing day to day. It’s an important part of meaning in an individual’s daily life and therefore as a leader I think you really must know where you want this organisation to go.

Q9
What are your weaknesses, the things you do less well, the worst thing about being leader?

The most criticised aspect of a leader is that they don’t listen and if you’re on a mission sometimes it’s actually hard to listen to others. You want to tell them, to inspire them, to communicate. On a very personal level I sometimes suffer from a delusion of my own invincibility. I take on more and more and more. I think I’m so energetic I’ll never get ill, I’ll never sit down, I’ll never fall over and occasionally life comes up and hits me over the head and just reminds me that I am after all human and I need to slow down a bit and let others help me in this great task that I’m trying to achieve, whatever it is.
Q10
So does being a leader give you a buzz - do you enjoy it?
I'm very fortunate in that I love what I do, and loving what you do makes it easy to bring your passion and energy and commitment to it in a way that you know when people look in your eyes and you're telling them it is a really exciting thing to do they can believe you because it happens to be true. I just hope that lots of people are as fortunate as me and that they're engaged in work that they love.

Q.11
Can you give an example, a case study, of when you've really turned something round?
An important part of being on this earth is about making a difference, leaving a footprint, whatever it is and in my work as a leadership coach I sometimes get feedback from people that I've made a difference to their lives, that I have spoken with them about something, they've taken it seriously, they've gone away and they've been different in a way that's been very effective for them - and I wish I could bottle it!

END