

The Virgin Way: Everything I Know About Leadership

By Richard Branson

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Now Branson gives an inside look at his strikingly different swashbuckling style of leadership. Learn how fun, family, passion, and the dying art of listening are key components to what his extended family of employees around the world have always dubbed (with a wink) the “Virgin Way.”

This unique perspective comes from a man who dropped out of school at sixteen, suffers from dyslexia, and has never worked for anyone but himself. He may be famous for thinking outside the box—an expression he despises—but Branson asserts that “you’ll never have to think outside the box if you refuse to let anyone build one around you.”

This is a unique book on leadership from someone who readily admits he has never read a book on leadership in his life. So expect the unexpected.

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Editorial Review

Review
"Few people in contemporary business are as colorful, shrewd, and irreverent, and probably no one's nearly as much fun to be around . . . Branson embodies America's cherished mythology of the iconoclastic, swashbuckling entrepreneur." --*G*, praise for the author

"[Branson's] business instincts are matched by an ability to motivate people who work for him. And who wouldn't want to - Branson seems hell-bent on making sure that everybody, but everybody, is having as much fun as he is." --*Time*, praise for the author

"Virgin Group founder Branson reveals the methods that have helped him build his unconventional multibillion-dollar business empire. A prolific and outrageously successful promoter of himself and his myriad businesses, the author provides a rollicking romp through Virgin's fun-loving, iconoclastic approach to building a business and reputation." --*Kirkus Reviews*

"Branson's freewheeling spirit comes across in his leadership style as that of a man who values listening more than talking, keeping things simple, and giving employees a second or even a third chance. His approach may seem casual, but his results speak for themselves." --*Booklist*

About the Author
Sir Richard Branson is an international entrepreneur, adventurer, icon, and the founder of the Virgin Group. His autobiography, *Losing My Virginity*, and his books on business, *Screw It, Let's Do It* and *Business Stripped Bare*, are all international bestsellers. He is also the author of *Reach for the Skies, Screw Business As Usual,* and most recently *Like a Virgin*.

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PART ONE

Chapter 1

OLD BLOCKS AND YOUNG CHIPS

Leadership lessons begin at home

Sometimes the greatest leadership lessons can come from the most unexpected places. Some elements of leadership are almost certainly genetic and there is no escaping the fact that we are all products of our upbringing and our environment. As the saying goes, ‘An apple never falls far from the tree that bore it’. Well, as anyone who knows my mother Eve or my late father Ted will testify, I am certainly no exception to the rule. I recognise a lot of traits in myself that I have clearly inherited from my parents – mostly good – although just a few of the things that drove me nuts about my mum and dad when I was a kid almost certainly had the same effect on my own children.

From my first memories of her, my mum was always on the go, buzzing around the place. She had a seemingly limitless imagination for coming up with new business ideas. I don’t recall her ever considering herself an entrepreneur – that was probably only because I don’t think the word existed back then and if it

did nobody knew what it meant – but she was certainly the definition of ‘enterprising’. Eve is a human whirlwind. No matter what the latest big thing was, she’d always manage the whole process by herself from developing the ideas to crafting the products, to making deals with distributors, delivering and selling the goods. Nobody else could get in her way, it was her show and hers alone! I remember being very impressed by one of her more successful ventures, which was building and selling wooden tissue boxes and wastepaper bins. This one made it to some fairly swanky stores but they were generally more local ventures. She was absolutely tenacious, and taught me never to cry over spilt milk. If an item didn’t sell, she’d just write it off, learn from the experience and quite dispassionately move on and try something else. My sisters and I were always being dragged in as unpaid child labour, ‘a labour of love’ she’d call it, or the household chores would be delegated to us while Mum was in manufacturing mode. Obviously I didn’t realise it at the time but there was unquestionably a lot of osmosis going on in that house that would stand me in good stead later in life.

Eve hasn’t changed much even though she is now . . . oops. As she was the one that taught me never to talk about a woman’s age let’s leave it at ‘she is rather well into her eighties’. In her early life she had a spell as a West End dancer, and later became a stewardess for British South American Airways – that was in the really glamorous days of flying when they had to don oxygen masks to cross the Andes. To this day she just never stops moving! I don’t exactly lead a sedentary life myself but I swear that sometimes I have trouble keeping up with her.

One recent example was when quite out of the blue she casually announced her intention to organise a charity polo match – not exactly the kind of thing one expects from an octogenarian! But this wasn’t going to be something on the village green near her home – she was planning to do it in Morocco! Surprised but far from stunned, I told her in no uncertain terms that I thought it a really crazy idea; not only would it be a huge amount of work but it would probably end up costing her money rather than raising it. She listened intently to what I had to say and then went ahead and did it anyway. Not only did it happen but it was a huge success and raised about a quarter of a million dollars. So while I was denied the opportunity to say, ‘See, Mum, I told you so’, I really had to admire her tenacity and so instead simply said (a very quiet) ‘Well done, Mum.’

Another of those family signature characteristics that I am told I have inherited is forever insisting on getting the last word in on any given subject. Well, just to show how flexible I can be on such things, I am going to let Eve have some of the first words in this book so (as a published author herself) I invited her to write a few thoughts. Based on what I’ve just told you about her, see if any of the following sounds familiar? ‘Apples and trees!’

Dear Ricky,

If you're really going to let me say something in your next book, then here it goes.

We saw it in you from virtually the first moment you began to talk. But even before that, when you learned to walk we realised we were going to have our hands full; you were just a toddler but you were clearly someone who liked to do things his own way and on your own terms.

To make matters even more interesting, as you grew you perpetually had some crazy new scheme or other up your sleeve that you were convinced was either going to change the world, make lots of money, or both! On a few such occasions we would say things like, ‘Oh don’t be ridiculous, Ricky! That’s never going to work.’ More often than not, however, your father and I instead opted to give you plenty of scope to learn by your mistakes and so left you to get on with your Christmas tree growing, bird breeding and all the other weird and wonderful enterprises you came up with. Almost without exception they all ended in some form of a disaster with us picking up the pieces – literally and metaphorically – but we’d soldier on and just kept

hoping that one day the lessons learned would help you in life.

And that certainly would seem to have turned out to be the case. After a rocky beginning, once you and Virgin had become an established success, Ted and I would often ponder on just how differently you might have turned out had we been more controlling, or some might say ‘better’, parents. What if we had insisted that you not take so many silly risks and, rather than allowing you to drop out of school at sixteen, forced you to buckle down and complete your education? Like your headmaster at Stowe, who famously (now) predicted that by twenty-one you would either be in jail or a millionaire, we too shared some very serious misgivings about what the future might have in store for you.

As we now know, of course, we needn’t have worried. What we saw as being a pig-headed little boy who was utterly determined to do his own thing, turned out to be nothing more than the growing pains of a budding entrepreneur. If only we had been able to recognise that at the time we might have had a lot fewer sleepless nights!

Love, Mum

I read that some wag once said of me, ‘That Branson chap is the luckiest person I know. You just watch – if he ever falls off a high building he’s almost certainly going to fall upwards!’ Please don’t hold your breath on this one as it’s not a theory I intend to test any time soon! Others have suggested that I was simply ‘born lucky’. Perhaps!

In my opinion ‘luck’ is a highly misunderstood commodity. It’s certainly not something that drops out of the heavens, you really can work at helping it along – but more on that later. For now suffice it to say that I came into this world a lot luckier than most people. I had the good fortune to be born into a wonderfully loving family where I enjoyed a safe and ‘sensible’ childhood in post-war England. I grew up in a home where there were few if any excesses, but at the same time my two sisters and I never really wanted for much of anything, especially affection and guidance from our parents.

Looking back on that period of my life I have to heap praise on the stalwart efforts of my mother and father, as I certainly was not the easiest child to bring up. Apart from being dyslexic I was blessed with an indomitable spirit that, whether she wants to admit it or not, unquestionably came from my mother Eve’s side of the family. Perhaps she recognised this kindred spirit in me as she was constantly taking the lead in trying to keep young ‘Ricky’ (that would be me) in line. At the same time it was also very much a team effort with my father Ted, even if the two of them didn’t always realise it at the time.

There are many examples of this. Like one Sunday in church when I point-blank refused to sit next to the son of a friend of my mother’s simply because I didn’t like the child. Despite my mum’s loudly whispered protestations, I instead sat with a friend on the opposite side of the aisle. I really didn’t think it was that big of a deal, so I was utterly shocked when I got back home and, for what might have been the first time ever, my mother insisted that Dad should spank my bottom. She loudly proclaimed that, ‘The boy has to learn that such behaviour will simply not be tolerated in this house.’ As I was thinking, ‘But I didn’t do it in this house’, Dad dragged me out of the room by the scruff of the neck and then, just loudly enough to ensure that Mum would hear him, proclaimed, ‘Okay, young man. It’s time for me to teach you a lesson that you’ll never forget!’

And he certainly did. Following his quickly whispered instructions, I squealed in an appropriately pained manner as my dad proceeded to loudly clap his hands together half a dozen times. In a conspiratorial whisper he then told me to go back in to see Mum and apologise while looking ‘suitably chastised’. It was all I could do to keep my face straight when mid-apology Dad gave me a huge wink from behind Mum’s back.

Dad was really just a big softy at heart, but I am convinced that the way he handled the situation after church that day taught me a far more lasting lesson than a severely bruised bottom (and ego) could ever have achieved. I'm not sure if my mother ever knew about the fake spanking – if she didn't then when she reads this she certainly will – but there was another more serious occasion when Ted's parenting skills have stuck with me forever. On the odd occasion I had been guilty of helping myself to a few pennies from the loose change that Dad used to unload from his pockets into the top drawer in his bedroom wardrobe. To my childish amusement I had also discovered it was the same drawer where Dad kept his secret stash of what we used to call 'dirty books', but I digress. Helping myself to his change was never something I saw as 'stealing' per se. In my juvenile mind I was just kind of 'borrowing' it and we'd simply never established the repayment terms or structure.

As it turned out, however, I was the one who was about to get repaid by getting myself into a lot of trouble. We lived just around the corner from a sweet shop and I'd been using my ill-gotten gains to buy chocolate, with Cadbury's fruit and nut being my particular favourite. One day, though, I'd taken a much bigger 'loan' than usual from Dad's wardrobe bank and promptly done my part to boost Cadbury's shareholder value. The 'old lady' who owned the shop, who at the time was probably all of forty years old, quickly smelled a rat. She said nothing to me, but the next time I was in her shop in the company of my father she staggered me by blurting out, 'Now I don't want to get him into any trouble, Mr Branson, but I don't know where young Richard's getting all his money from. He's becoming quite my best customer – so I do hope he isn't stealing it.' I remember her words like it were yesterday and thinking, 'Did she really have to put that zinger on the end?'

But then, just as I was thinking, 'Oops, I'm really in for it now!' my dad staggered me by putting his nose right up to hers, looking her straight in the eyes and loudly declaring, 'Madam, how dare you accuse my son of stealing?' I was even more surprised when, after we'd marched out of the shop, he never said another word about it. Sometimes, though, the power of the unspoken word can be a frighteningly powerful thing and my father's studied silence with me for the rest of that day spoke volumes. In addition, the fact that he'd immediately jumped in and vehemently defended his light-fingered son's integrity made me feel more guilt-ridden and miserable than if he had berated me in front of her.

Dad's handling of the situation certainly taught me a hugely effective lesson. Not only did I never pinch another penny from my parents, but it also taught me a life-lesson on the power of forgiveness and giving people a second chance. I'd like to say the incident also taught me the importance of 'giving the benefit of the doubt', except in that particular case my father was in no doubt whatsoever as to precisely what had been going on.

Some business leaders have built their personal brand images (and businesses) around their quirkiness and outspoken eccentricities, be they hard-nosed, authoritarian or just downright crotchety. Michael O'Leary, CEO of the Irish airline Ryanair, once described his ideal customer as 'someone with a pulse and a credit card' and in the same 'Lunch with the Financial Times' interview referred to the British Airports Authority as the 'Evil Empire' and the UK's Civil Aviation Authority as a bunch of 'cretins and twerps'. While nobody can question Ryanair's incredible financial success (last time I checked the low-cost carrier had built a market cap of over $13 billion), being voted Europe's 'least liked' airline by TripAdvisor subscribers is something that would not sit well with me no matter how good the bottom line looks. American property magnate Donald Trump is another controversial character who seems to be either loved or hated by the consumer and is perhaps most famous for his 'You're fired' line, something he seems to delight in telling people on his TV show The Apprentice. Unlike both these very successful gentlemen I have always believed there are tremendous upsides to a more conciliatory approach to life and business – an attitude that even Michael O'Leary is now publicly proclaiming he wants his much-maligned airline to assume, although it remains to be seen whether or not this particular Celtic Tiger can change his stripes. I'm not a betting man,

but if I were, I'm not at all sure I would put money on this one!

While I wouldn't be foolish enough to pretend that Virgin's three airlines have never had passengers with valid complaints or that I have never fired anyone, I can honestly say that, unlike Mr Trump, the latter is not something I have ever taken the slightest pleasure in doing. On the contrary, I will usually move heaven and earth to avoid letting someone go, as when it comes to such a last resort I feel both sides have somehow failed each other. It's so much better, where possible, to try and forgive offenders and give them a second chance, just like my mother and father did so often with me as a child.

I had a very similar incident to my sweet shop experience much later in life only this time it was me who got to play the role of my dad. One day while sitting at Virgin Records I took a phone call from the owner of a nearby record shop who wanted to tip me off to the fact that one of our employees, whom he named, had been offering him piles of brand-new Virgin Records at suspiciously low prices and on a cash-only basis. When he signed off with the words, 'I just hope he's not stealing them', I had a definite déjà vu moment as my mind flashed back to my identical sweet shop indictment as a boy.

Sadly, the person that the record shop man named happened to be someone we considered to be one of our brighter young A & R people and, much as I dislike these kinds of confrontation, on this occasion I had no option but to haul him into the office and repeat what I had just been told. The poor guy went bright red and was clearly horribly embarrassed but he made no attempt to deny or defend his actions, opting instead to simply apologise profusely and say there was really no excuse for his behaviour. Rather than firing him on the spot, however, as he had every right to expect, on the spur of the moment I opted instead to tell him that although he had let himself and the company down very badly we were going to give him a second chance. The look of stunned amazement on his face said it all, and from that day on he worked his socks off for us and went on to have a stellar career, personally discovering some of Virgin Records' most successful artists along the way – Boy George being just one of them.

When it comes to needing a second chance, however, nobody needs it more than ex-prisoners who are looking to restart their lives after they have served their time. The sad thing is that if they are honest and tick the 'criminal record' box on an employment application form they'll seldom get an interview, let alone a shot at landing the job. Ironically, the result tends to become one huge self-fulfilling prophecy. When they can't find employment, statistics show that fifty per cent or more of ex-offenders take the seemingly easy way out and resort to crime as the only way to support themselves, and then quickly end up back inside.

My good friend and Comic Relief creator Jane Tewson was the one who first drew my attention to the sad plight of ex-cons. In the process, Jane even succeeded in doing something I have worked long and hard at avoiding – she had me put behind bars. Actually, it wasn't the first time, but we don't need to go into that right now! Suffice it to say that Jane encouraged me to see first-hand the challenges prisoners face when attempting to re-enter the workforce by voluntarily spending a day in jail with them. In late 2009, I duly served my day in a high-security prison in Melbourne, Australia and it certainly opened my eyes to the problem ex-prisoners have re-entering society, something about which I had never given a moment's thought.

While down under I also met with an inspiring group of leaders from The Toll Group, Australia's largest transportation company. I learned how they had been trying to do their bit to improve the lot of recently released prisoners and had hired almost 500 of them over the previous decade – a number that represents about ten per cent of the company's workforce. The truly inspirational part of what they told me, though, was that not one of their former inmates had, to the best of their knowledge, ever reoffended!

I have since constantly encouraged all of the Virgin companies around the world to work hard at following

Toll's example. In the UK we have been cooperating closely with the charity Working Chance, which since 2007 has taken the lead in working to place female ex-prisoners back into gainful employment thereby breaking the cycle that can turn one little mistake or bad decision into a life sentence, whether in or out of prison. Last time I checked, Working Chance had placed almost 200 female ex-prisoners with Pret a Manger, Sainsbury's and a variety of Virgin companies like Virgin Trains and Virgin Management.

Perhaps the biggest irony here is that in 1971, but for the good graces of a British magistrate, I might well have had a prison record myself. I was caught red-handed by Customs and Excise officers in the act of ingeniously (or so my naïve teenage self had thought) 'manipulating' purchase taxes on the export and import of record albums. It was only by way of my parents generously posting the family home as collateral for my bail and then my fully paying off the hefty fine I'd been given that I managed to avoid being stuck with a criminal record. Had I actually done time and been branded as an ex-con, then the chances are very real that Virgin might never have happened and the tens of thousands of jobs we have created would never have existed. Had I gone to jail for my stupid teenage error of judgement I would have been the same person as the one who (luckily) did not end up behind bars, but I would almost certainly have been stigmatised by society and almost certainly have led a very different life as a result.

SPEAK NO EVIL

In our living room at home my mum and dad used to have one of those peculiar little statues of the 'Three Wise Monkeys' – you may have seen them – that embody the proverbial principle of 'See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil'. Well, while there wasn't a lot they could do about the 'see no evil' part, they went to great lengths to teach me to never think or speak badly of others.

They encouraged me to always look for the good in people instead of assuming the worst and trying to find fault. If they ever heard me gossiping or talking someone down they would have me go and look at myself in a mirror for five minutes, the idea being that I should see how such behaviour reflected badly on me. I was also taught that fits of pique or any outward displays of anger or rudeness never serve any useful purpose and if anything play only to your disadvantage. It was a lesson that stuck, and to this day I frequently have people say things to me like 'I really don't know how you could be so pleasant with those people' or 'If I were you I'd have been really angry about what they just did', when in fact I had just bottled up my emotions. The thing my parents didn't make any effort to teach me was how to keep my obvious delight at something under wraps, the downside of which is that it doesn't help my poker game very much.

Whether we like it or not, however, we are all very much the product of our upbringing and our environment. After my little church incident, had my father handled the moment differently and put me across his knee, I would probably still remember the spanking but would have long forgotten what it was for! The importance of the leadership lessons we absorb from our parents and in due course pass along to our own children and those with whom we work cannot be understated.

I have always viewed the maturation of companies as being very much like that of young people. When they are newborn or toddlers they tend to get away with all kinds of stuff on the basis that they are just finding their feet and so they generally enjoy a higher forgiveness factor. If companies survive this stage (many do not), like teenagers they then start to develop acne and other character blemishes while they get a little bit cocky and know-it-all. After that there comes a more mature stage: they have hopefully learned from their mistakes and settled down, but this period is filled with very different kinds of risks, with complacency possibly being the biggest. And once a company reaches the mid-life crisis stage it easily gets lazy, overweight, set in its ways and, like adults, can spend more time looking in the rear-view mirror than forging new ways forward and trying to see what's around the next corner.

From a leadership perspective, shepherding a company through each of these various stages of growth is not that different to bringing up a child. Just as raising a toddler is very different to keeping a teenager on track and the skill sets may change a little as the company gets older, the fundamentals of parenting and corporate leadership are very closely intertwined. I was reminded of this fact when I recently overheard a friend of mine, who has three incredibly rambunctious young sons, playfully threaten his youngest, eleven-year-old, Charlie that if the going ever got tough, on the basis of last in, first out, he'd be the first one to be let go. I laughed out loud, but it was the boy's immediate response that really struck home with me. With a big impish smile, he looked his father right in the eye and retorted, 'But Dad, why would you do that? If you think about it I am much cheaper to keep because I don't eat nearly as much as my older brothers do.'

The inescapable fact is that learning and leadership are two-way streets and even the oldest and wisest block can pick up a lot from the most junior of chips. Sadly, my father and best friend Ted Branson passed away in early 2010 at the grand old age of ninety-three, leaving a huge hole in his family's lives. He certainly left his mark on me and but for his wisdom and restraint on more than one occasion, those marks could quite deservedly have made sitting down a very painful process!

Having given my mum the chance to chime in earlier, I am also going to let her have the last word – something she always enjoys! I very much doubt that she will remember saying it, but I certainly have never forgotten the sage advice my mother gave me after a school cricket match. I loved cricket and was generally pretty good at it, but this had been a game in which I had an uncharacteristically timid outing with the bat and before I'd contributed a single run I was clean bowled without so much as a 'wave of the English Willow'! Driving home afterwards Mum surprised me with her cricketing wisdom when she said, 'Ricky, as I'm sure you'll agree, that wasn't really one of your better performances out there this afternoon. In future just remember one thing: you're guaranteed to miss every shot you don't take.'

It was years later before I realised she had probably been talking about a lot more than just cricket!

Chapter 2

THE DYING ART OF LISTENING

Listen – it makes you sound smarter

When I was a boy my parents never let me spend my time watching television. I well remember one time when my mum turned the TV off and asserted that it was going to be 'the death of conversation', which immediately provoked a twenty-minute argument with her TV-starved son. After we'd agreed to disagree, Mum couldn't resist getting the last word in: 'You see, if you'd been watching TV we wouldn't just have enjoyed that interesting discussion.'

And, while I may not have appreciated it at the time, as usual, my mother was absolutely correct. Although I may have been denied access to the small screen, I did get to watch my fair share of stuff on the big screen where I was (and still am) a big fan of Westerns, especially those starring the late great John Wayne. Despite all the memorable visual moments in Wayne's films it was one line that has stuck with me from the movie Big Jake: 'You're short on ears and long on mouth.' Even without the classic John Wayne drawl, it is such a great way to describe one of the most common human failings – listening too little and talking too much – that I have been borrowing it ever since.

L-I-S-T-E-N

One thing I do remember from an English class at school was when a teacher pointed out that if you want to play anagrams with the above letters they also form the word SILENT. As an ardent Scrabble fan and being

a little more tuned in than usual that day, I recall precociously pointing out that the letters could also spell ENLIST. This led to a class discussion, which has clearly stuck with me: if more of us could ‘enlist’ the art of remaining ‘silent’ in order to ‘listen’ we would, in one fell swoop, dramatically improve our ability to learn and get a lot more out of our time at school.

Maybe the class discussion was too little too late for me as within a year or so of that English class I had left Stowe in order to launchStudent, my own magazine, and soon found myself putting that teacher’s words into practice. I remember as if it were yesterday, interviewing novelist John le Carré whose 1963 breakthrough novel The Spy Who Came in From the Cold was an instant bestseller. I was as nervous as a kitten as I frantically scribbled down notes on his responses to my carefully prepared list of questions. I often carried a big old reel-to-reel Grundig tape recorder, although it was more to give me the appearance of being a professional than anything else as half the time it never worked. That was when I took up what was to become a lifetime habit: I began capturing my thoughts, observations and just about anything of interest that someone said or did in my hard-backed lined notebooks.

In the forty-odd years that I have been in business – wow, just writing that makes me suddenly feel ancient – those now hundreds of notebooks have served me incredibly well. And I am not talking about just their day-to-day aide-memoire uses, but in four major lawsuits with British Airways, G-Tech, T-Mobile and most recently with our run-in with the UK Department for Transport on the West Coast train franchise renewal. Listening is a wonderful skill, but given that the average human brain tends to store a very small percentage of what, at the time, may seem like insignificant statements and ideas, those books fill in a lot of what otherwise would be blank spaces in my memory bank. Acquiring the habit of note-taking is therefore a wonderfully complementary skill to that of listening. Please write this down right now so you don’t forget it!

Unfortunately, as leadership skills go, listening gets a bit of a ‘bum rap’ – that may also have been a John Wayne line. It’s such a seemingly passive thing that many people misguidedly see it as almost a sign of weakness – as in ‘Did you notice Harry hardly said a word in the meeting, I wonder what his problem is?’ Such a viewpoint is almost certainly fuelled by the historical association between great leaders and great orators being powerful people. Ask a Brit of my generation whom they would consider to be history’s greatest leader and like me they’d probably name wartime prime minister Sir Winston Churchill. Ask for a speech and they’d almost certainly reference his 1940 ‘this was their finest hour’ broadcast. Had I grown up in the US, the chances are that I would probably put John F. Kennedy on the same pedestal and perhaps justify the choice by referencing his famous ‘Ask not what your country can do for you’ speech.

Don’t get me wrong, both these men were iconic leaders and the importance of having the ability to express one’s thoughts in an articulate and compelling manner is a tremendous asset – and certainly in our video clip/sound-bite driven world, a lot more newsworthy than being a great listener; news footage that features ‘and here we see the president listening intently as only he can’ is hardly going to move the opinion polls! Oratorical excellence, however, is just one of a compendium of leadership skills and not the be-all and end-all that some would believe it to be. Apart from anything else, the majority of world leaders and captains of industry don’t actually write their own speeches – Churchill being one highly notable exception to this rule – so it is dangerous to judge them by words that are not their own but rather the work of highly paid speech writers. Winston Churchill was, however, renowned for his ability to sit down and listen to anyone and everyone, and his view on the importance of listening is evidenced by another quote often attributed to him,‘Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.’

Could it be that his skills as a listener might have been one of the things that made him such a great writer and speaker? I would venture to submit that it is no small coincidence.

LISTENING IS NOT HEARING

If there were ever a dead giveaway that somebody is not listening to a word of what you're saying, it's when they repeatedly use the annoying phrase, 'I hear you, I hear you.' Unfortunately, hearing is not listening. On a recent long-haul flight I could most assuredly hear the infant a few seats behind me that cried incessantly for the whole night, but I didn't care to listen to it. I can hear the wind in the trees but I don't take as much time as I should to listen to that either. And I don't believe it's entirely a matter of semantics. When someone says, 'I heard every word he said', in a strictly literal sense they may be telling the truth, but fifty per cent of the time they could probably just as truthfully add, 'although I didn't absorb one iota of it.' Paradoxically, while I have always prided myself on being a good listener, I may have had an unfair advantage on most people. Having grown up with dyslexia I learned very early in life that if I wanted to take anything in then I had to force myself to listen intently. Not only that, but in order to have any chance of remembering what I was listening to, I also had to make the effort to take copious handwritten notes: a habit that I still diligently practise to this day.

As an adult in business I have used this lesson to great advantage. I've also discovered that, as an adjunct to listening to what people have to say, my now infamous and utterly low-tech notebook is one of the most powerful tools I have in my bag of business tricks. Apart from helping me remember little things I want to bring up with one of our airlines, like 'Add cold – not hot towel service' as I am travelling, more importantly I can't begin to count the number of times when referring to my notebooks has given me a clearly unexpected advantage on much bigger issues. A typical situation would be when someone says, 'Well, Richard, as I recall when we last spoke in early March, we agreed to get a draft proposal to you by the end of April', and they are totally discombobulated by a response of, 'Well, no, at least not according to my notes of our last conversation. At 3.15 p.m. on 7 February you promised you were going to have the complete business plan to us by 31 March at the latest.' Nailed! I even had someone once suggest that I had been illegally recording my phone conversations with him – like some kind of a Nixon White House tapes deal – but shut him down by saying, 'Yes, I do record a lot conversations but with a pen and a notebook!'

I suspect that over the years 'Richard's thing about taking notes' has become legend around the Virgin family of companies as I always detect a much higher percentage of note-takers at internal meetings than with outside parties. For example, I recently had a day-long series of meetings on Necker with a group of about twenty senior people and I couldn't help but observe that our own people seemed to be the only ones taking any serious notes. I don't know if the senior executives present were accustomed to having an assistant to take the minutes, or if they somehow felt it was beneath them to take notes – or maybe they all felt they had photographic memories – but I was distinctly unimpressed. One of the outside executives did peck away at his iPad on a regular basis, but based on the semi-furtive way he went about doing it, rather than taking notes I suspected he was responding to emails or playing Words With Friends.

Call me old-fashioned if you will, but the all-too-common practice of texting or emailing under the boardroom table in the middle of a meeting is something that I find extremely irritating and downright disrespectful to everyone else in the room. I am not a big fan of lengthy meetings at the best of times, but is it really asking too much to have someone's undivided attention for an hour without them having to constantly demonstrate their self-perceived indispensability by electronically tuning out every few minutes? I think not.

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