

Leadership lessons from the Iron Lady

 By [Dr Nikolaus Eberl](#)

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Vilified by some, loved by others - the leadership legacy of Margaret Thatcher is as varied as it is distinct. [Said German chancellor Angela Merkel](#): "She was an extraordinary leader in global politics of her time. I will never forget her part in surmounting the division of Europe and at the end of the Cold War."

Analysing Thatcher's eleven and a half years in office, here are three primary leadership lessons that have characterised her style of leadership and are most applicable both to leadership in politics and business today - be it a retailer, a marketing agency, a motor manufacturer or whatever.

1. Clarity trumps consensus

Shortly after taking office in Downing Street in 1979, Thatcher stated that "I am not a consensus politician. I'm a conviction politician." From the very beginning, she not only had a clear conviction but also a definite roadmap of where she wanted to take the country.

According to leadership guru, [Brendon Burchard](#), the founder of the High Performance Academy and author of the best-selling book "The Charge: Activating the Ten Human Drives that make you feel alive", clarity is the foremost quality of leaders and the one most cherished by followers.

Part of leadership clarity is the ability to not only be clear in your messaging but also (and more importantly) to be clear in the follow-through. In sharp contrast to many a self-styled leader who profess one thing and practice another, Thatcher was never a turncoat for anybody. In her first year of office, [Thatcher countered](#) those that argued she would not be able to stay the course in the face of strong opposition: "To those waiting with bated breath for that favourite media catchphrase, the U-turn, I have only one thing to say. You turn if you want to. The lady's not for turning."

Commenting about the legacy of Thatcher, the last governor of Hong Kong, Chris Patton, told the BBC that not only did she make Britain governable again but she was the polar opposite to a phenomenon that is dominating politics today, which he called 'triangulation': never sticking to principles but always looking for the weakest denominator between two opposing views and then meeting up somewhere in the middle.

[Once she told](#) her foreign policy advisor Sir Anthony Parsons she was glad she didn't belong to his class, he replied, "What class would that be, prime minister?" And she responded, "The upper-middle class, who see everybody's point of view but have no view of their own."

Even her contemporary German counterpart, former Chancellor Helmut Kohl (in office 1982-1998), who crossed swords with the Iron Lady many a time - and mostly fiercely over her opposition to Germany's re-unification in 1989/90 - [concedes that he](#) "greatly valued Margaret Thatcher for her incomparable openness, honesty and straightforwardness."

2. Instilling Competitive Identity

Competitive Identity, a concept popularised by the author of the [Nation Branding Index](#), Simon Anholt, postulates that for any organisation - be it a corporation or a nation - to succeed in today's hyper-competitive environment, instilling a clear and compelling identity is key to positioning your brand and winning new markets. Said Charles Powell, one of the closest aides of the Iron Lady: "She changed us all. We went from being a people who saw ourselves as eternally on the downward slide to a nation that was proud to be British again. On the world stage too, she made Britain count once more. She was a startling presence who brought a strong and controversial style to our diplomacy after years of Foreign Office blandness."

Restoring the country's Competitive Identity during the Falkland's crisis, is what turned Thatcher's ratings during her first term of office from rock bottom and almost guaranteed to lose the next election to a landslide victory in 1983. Contrary to the warnings of her security advisors who insisted on seeking a solution to the crisis through the diplomatic channels and urged her to make concessions to the invading Argentinians, Thatcher realised that resolving this conflict conclusively would go a long way to restoring Britain's self-confidence.

In an era where nearly 1 in 3 U.S. workers is seriously considering leaving his or her current organisation, and another 21% view their employers unfavourably and have rock-bottom scores on key levels of engagement (meaning that over 54% of the entire workforce is actively disengaged from their organisational mission), instilling competitive identity is no longer a nice-to-have option but rather a mission critical must-have.

3. Willpower determines success

One of Thatcher's famous quotes was, "Disciplining yourself to do what you know is right and important, although difficult, is the high road to pride, self-esteem, and personal satisfaction." As politically incorrect as this sounds (and the self-help industry has made us believe for almost one century), recent studies have shown that self-discipline is a key determinant of personal success.

In his book "Willpower: Rediscovering the greatest human Strength", German scientist Roy F Baumeister shares an experiment conducted by Professor Walter Mischel at Stanford University called 'The Marshmallow Experiment'. In a nutshell, the researchers were studying how a child learns to resist immediate gratification, and they found a creative new way to observe the process in four-year old children. They would bring the children one at a time into a room, show them a marshmallow, and offer them a deal before leaving them alone in the room. The children could eat the marshmallow whenever they wanted to, but if they held off until the experimenter returned, they would get a second marshmallow to eat along with it.

As expected, some children gobbled the marshmallow right away, whilst others tried resisting but couldn't hold out, and some managed to wait out the whole fifteen minutes for the bigger reward. The ones who succeeded tended to do so by distracting themselves, which seemed an interesting enough finding at the time of the experiments, in the 1960s.

Much later, though, Prof Mischel discovered something else thanks to a stroke of good fortune. His own daughters happened to attend the same school, on the Stanford University campus, where the marshmallow experiments took place. Long after he finished the experiments and moved on to other topics, Mischel kept hearing from his daughters about their classmates.

He noticed that the children who had failed to wait for the extra marshmallow seemed to get in more trouble than the others, both in and out of school. To see if there was a pattern, Mischel and his colleagues tracked down hundreds of veterans of the experiments. They found that the ones who had shown the most willpower at age four went on to get better grades and test scores.

The children who had managed to hold out the entire fifteen minutes went on to score 210 points higher on the SAT than the ones who had caved after the first half minute. The children with willpower grew up to become more popular with their peers and their teachers. They earned higher salaries. They had a lower body-mass index, suggesting that they were less prone to gain weight as middle age encroached. They were less likely to report having had problems with drug abuse.

The "Thatcher Doctrine"

Clearly, willpower was a key component of Thatcher's success formula and she alluded to it when she welcomed the English football team outside of 10 Downing Street in 1980, [saying that](#) "I've got a woman's ability to stick to a job and get on with it when everyone else walks off and leaves it."

Paying tribute to Mrs Thatcher, former US Secretary of State, [James Baker described](#) the "Thatcher doctrine": "First, decide what is right, even if that is not always convenient or expedient. Second, let people know what is right, give people a sound direction, trust them - sooner or later they will recognise what is right. Third, be persistent; don't give up and don't let up." Jokingly, [Baker added](#) a fourth component of the 'Thatcher Doctrine': "Fourth and finally, when negotiations stall, get out the handbag! The solution is always there, usually written on a small piece of paper deep within it."

Was Margaret Thatcher's leadership flawless? Certainly not - in fact, her last two years in office saw her fumbling from one mistake to the other, mostly due to her obstinate reluctance to consider views other than her own. However, much can be gleaned from the above leadership principles -especially at a time when consumer confidence in the leadership abilities of their top brass is at a record low globally.

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