

What leaders do

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There is this rather quaint story, one that's probably true, about officers of the Israeli army that exemplifies what leadership is all about. Officers of the IDF (Israeli Defence Forces), the story goes, go into battle with the words "follow me". Now that's leadership for you. So, is leadership only about leading from the front and facing danger – physical or otherwise – head on? No, not really.

In fact, it's rather difficult to arrive at a single, catch-all defini-

tion of leadership, especially in today's complex world. For leadership is, to a great extent, the result of circumstances and the environment. What works in one setting may not work in another. Yet, leadership, or rather one aspect of it, is leading from the front or leading by example. Armchair generals are just that - armchair generals - be it in the military, business or politics. Because, while it is vital for leaders to have that macro perspective and to be able to go on 'inner voyages of



discovery' that result in a 'vision' for the organisation, the industry or the country, it's also important for a leader to be in touch with what's on at the frontline – the place where all the action is.

This quality apart, what else is it that leaders need to do? While it is virtually impossible to arrive at an exhaustive list of leadership competencies, the ability to listen and communicate, to know what makes people tick, to respect differences and encourage debate, personal integrity and the ability to drive change are some qualities most leadership researchers mention.

Those who work in the area of leadership studies also emphasise

that leadership skills can be developed. This belief represents a radical departure from past thinking on the issue – leaders are born, not made. The realisation that leaders can be groomed, provided sufficient investments are made, is a shot in the arm for Indian business that is facing an acute shortage of leaders. Equally encouraging are the efforts of corporates, such as Infosys to kick-start the study of leadership as a discipline in this country.

The essays and interviews in this issue of *Praxis* are an attempt to understand, at least to some extent, the intricacies of leadership. While the articles present

diverse thoughts on leadership, they also highlight the fact that leadership is not the outcome of some arcane formula, but an intensely personal thing. And no one expresses this better than Field Marshall Viscount Slim, a former commander-in-chief of the UK's defence forces, who in an address at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst in 1952 said: "Leadership is the most personal thing in the world for the simple reason that it is just plain you." ■