



The Executive Seat is a new series that looks at human resource matters, corporate management and the business of hiring staff. This week, Rachael Boon speaks to behavioural statistics expert Joseph Folkman

## Push is good but inspirational pull makes a difference

RENOWNED behavioural statistics expert Joseph Folkman, 63, is co-founder and president of Zenger Folkman, a firm that helps companies improve their business and develop employees by building on strengths.

As a psychometrician, as the field is known, his pet subjects include leadership development, feedback, and individual and organisational change.

Utah-based Dr Folkman, who has five children, was in town as a guest speaker talking about how to develop extraordinary leadership. One way is to focus on building strengths, as this is more effective than a preoccupation with fixing weaknesses.

### ■ How would you describe extraordinary leadership?

When I talk to leaders, sometimes I compare them to average leaders and I'd wonder how people would react. I thought they'd be discouraged but they weren't. They were impressed and always said: "Well, I'm not bad."

They were sort of happy being good but didn't see the difference between good and great.

For example, when we looked at profitability at a mortgage bank, great leaders doubled the profit, ensured higher levels of customer satisfaction; and engagement of employees was significantly more. Fifty per cent of people want to quit (from under) a poor leader, but only about 16 per cent want to leave a great leader.

Good leaders have employees who are average – in other words, this job is as good as any other. Great leaders have employees at the 80th percentile on engagement. The percentage of highly committed employees good leaders have is about 30 per cent; and great leaders have about 60 per cent.

We always thought our job is to fix the bad ones (leaders), but that's a small part. Our major job is to really enhance the good ones, to move them to great.

I know you're good – you wouldn't be there (at the job) if you weren't. The question is what would it take to be great, and I think that puts people on a different mindset.

### ■ What can leaders or employees do to become extraordinary leaders?

As a leader, you have to ask yourself: Do I have a fatal flaw? Is there something I'm doing that's horrible? Everybody has a weakness but you may not have fatal flaws. If you do, you need to fix it, or they'd fire you.

If you don't have a fatal flaw, what would make you the best or stand out in your field?

We did the research, a study with 2,000 leaders where we looked at the impact of strengths 10 years ago and it shocked us. We measured them on 16 competencies, and a strength was defined as a competency at the 90th percentile.

If they didn't have strengths, their average effectiveness was at the 34th percentile.

What impact would you have if you did one thing well? The data suggested that for people with one strength, their overall perceived effectiveness moved to the 64th percentile.

What was fascinating was that if people were good at three things, it pulled all of them to the top 20 per cent of all leaders.

We found that the idea of always pushing up from the bottom – that's a belief that you can only be as good as your least positive trait. That could be the case if it's a fatal flaw.

But if you could do three things incredibly well, you'd be noticeable and marketable.

Our industry, organisations,

have made a career out of pointing out what's wrong with people, what they're not doing well. But what they need are people who are really good with stuff.

It's funny – one of my kids decided to try competitive soccer once... They put you through drills and the coach will read your number if you made the team.

The coach didn't read my son's name. My son headed for the coach with a burning question: "Why didn't I make the team?" The coach said he missed a kick and my son goes: "I didn't make the team because I missed a kick."

That's our life. How did the coach explain his lack of success? What did he point out? A mistake. Sometimes that's true but I noticed three kids who missed the kick, and two made the team.

Do you have to make the kick to make the team?

Evidently not. You have to stand out. My son just looked



Dr Folkman says the ability to inspire and motivate others plays a key role in the success of a leader. ST PHOTO: AZIZ RUSLIN

like part of the crowd.

We just made this shift from figuring out what's wrong to figuring out what's right.

### ■ What competencies are leaders in Singapore looking at?

We had some data from Singapore with 110 leaders and the top-rated competency was taking the initiative. Next came honesty, technical expertise and the drive for results.

Guess what was dead last? "Inspires and motivates others." But that makes the biggest difference in your ability to be successful.

There are two ways to get work done in an organisation. One way is to "push", which is the drive for results. The other is to "pull", which is to inspire and motivate.

Our research showed that the combined effect is 85 per cent. The moral is that pushing is good but we need you to keep pushing and start pulling.

### ■ Who are some examples of great leaders?

Great leaders come in different sizes and shapes. A leader here who I always thought was amazing is AC Ho (management consultant) – he's very astute and so good with relationships.

I was here one time with my wife. He took us to dinner. He ordered some chicken and they brought it out with the head on it.

AC noticed my wife's (shocked) reaction and asked the waiter to chop the head off.

He's an example of someone who always notices those things and checks with you about how you are doing and what's going on.

Other leaders here are so visionary, some are driven and know how to deliver results. The worst thing to say is stuff like the best leaders are humble, this or that, because they really come in different sizes.

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