

The Apprentice: is there a real message for the workplace?

Nicola Banning gets all fired up

Why, I wonder, isn't there more about the world of work on our TV screens? Given how much of our lives is spent at work, and its impact on our physical and psychological health (so often witnessed by workplace counsellors), it seems to me that there's a distinct hole in our TV schedules. One show that finished its seventh series this summer, and which claims to be about the world of business, is *The Apprentice* on BBC One.

Whether it depicts the real world of business – or is an over-formatted reality TV show – is much debated. It's fair to say that the 16 candidates who start out on the show (in the main), tend not to be shrinking violets. At one level, *The Apprentice* appears to be about ruthless, arrogant, business people who have sociopathic levels of self-belief, and consequently they end up attracting much attention in column inches, blogs and online.

By way of introducing themselves, the candidates say things like, 'My first word wasn't mummy, it was money.' Or 'I am cold and unstoppable' and 'I like being unpopular because usually that means you're doing a job properly'. Such statements are standard fare on *The Apprentice*, and are usually a precursor to a fairly swift exit from Lord Sugar's boardroom. But hidden beneath the headlines, I think there are some more valuable messages being communicated on *The Apprentice* about business and the workplace.

For those unfamiliar with the show, here's the format. Up until this year, 16 aspiring business people would compete for a £100,000 job with Lord Sugar (previously known as Sir Alan Sugar). This year, with the recession biting and a need to refresh the format, the stakes were higher as the candidates were looking to win a £250,000 investment to start their own company with Lord Sugar as their business partner. This process is somewhat over-dramatically described by Lord Sugar as a 'dog-eat-dog process' and 'a job interview from hell'.

Each week, candidates are split into two teams which go head-to-head in a series of tasks selected by Lord Sugar to test their business skills to the full. A project manager is selected, and in 48 hours the teams undertake tasks such as devising new products, branding, creating adverts, selling and pitching. It's often impressive what a well-run team manage to achieve. The opposite is also true. Sometimes, it's almost unwatchable.

On completion of the task the teams return to the boardroom to find out which team has won. Because this is business, winning the task usually means gaining the most profit. The winning team is rewarded with a treat and the losing team return to battle it out in the boardroom. For the candidate least able to defend him/herself for the failings of the task, Lord Sugar will point his finger and dismiss them with the words, 'You're fired'.

Interviews with Lord Sugar report that (after seven series) he has grown tired of people shouting at him in the street 'you're fired'. And it's this crass aspect of the reality TV genre that many critics of *The Apprentice* deplore as yet another candidate exits his boardroom and the show. Even in the current economic climate, with job losses on the increase and the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development reporting 2011 as the worst year for jobs in 17 years, I wonder at the number of employers uttering the words 'you're fired'. But this, of course, is television.

The recently fired candidate is then ushered away in a black cab uttering his/her closing thoughts, only to turn up later on the sister show *The Apprentice: You're Fired* hosted by comedian Dara O'Briain, for the debrief of what went wrong. In this show, candidates (mostly) appear to be altogether more reasonable, less unpleasant and more self-aware when left to speak for themselves. Which perhaps just goes to show the power of editing.

Recent critics of *The Apprentice* have included former Tesco chief executive, Sir Terry Leahy. In an article in the *Daily Mail*, he warned that *The Apprentice* was 'not a good reflection of what's needed for success in business. Success in business is about good manners, the ability to work in a team, to motivate others, to put more in than you take out, about integrity.'² The problem is that *The Apprentice* is an entertainment show, and in amongst all the battles, backstabbing and bravado, one could be forgiven for not really noticing some of the characters who don't say lots of arrogant things or behave badly. Take the analogy of an unruly child who gets much more of teacher's attention than those children who behave well.

The Apprentice is a well-orchestrated piece of television in terms of the casting, how the characters play their roles and the dramas, tensions and conflicts

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that ensue. It is tightly edited and we, the audience, are manipulated. The drama is in the conflict, and conflict is in plentiful supply on *The Apprentice*. It takes place in teams or in the boardroom where some big personalities with bucket loads of self-belief vie for air time, power and position. Conflict at work is often cited as a reason for employees seeking help in the form of counselling or coaching, and I wonder if it's this aspect of *The Apprentice* that resonates so strongly with viewers?

Despite all this, the 2011 winner, Tom Pellereau, has been described as an unlikely victor on *The Apprentice* and a triumph for nerds and ‘the nice guy’³. An inventor who wore his intelligence lightly, he was slightly geeky, well-mannered, often insightful and the antithesis of the ruthless, arrogant businessman stereotype.

Personally, I wasn't that surprised by Tom Pellereau's victory. Easy to say after it's all over, I know, but he had many of the essential qualities that stood out in previous winners of *The Apprentice*. Firstly, and importantly in this new format, he had

a track history of inventing a product and bringing it onto the market successfully. Secondly, he had what almost all previous winners of *The Apprentice* have demonstrated: emotional intelligence.

So what are the messages that I think we can extract from *The Apprentice*?

It pays to listen

Winner, Tom Pellereau possessed a skill that is often underestimated in the workplace. So much so, that it often goes unacknowledged at all. He knew how to listen. And to show he was listening, he nodded. And because this was TV, he was filmed nodding, a lot. And for this he got nicknamed ‘the nodding dog’, which did little to value his listening skills. But candidates who don't listen, come unstuck.

One candidate, Vincent, who failed to listen to the market research or to his fellow team members who questioned his strategy, ended up being told by Lord Sugar, ‘Your biggest mistake was that you didn't listen.’ And for that, he was fired.

Have good social skills

Lord Sugar admits to not having to like people to employ them. And he appears scathing of candidates who can't separate their personal grudges from making business decisions. But generally, he does seem to take note of candidates who are well liked and respected by their colleagues. Candidates who repeatedly rub their colleagues up the wrong way stand out and get noticed, and not for the right reasons. And although Lord Sugar is sometimes critical of candidates who seem to be ‘too nice’ he also has a history of choosing them for his apprentice. Tim Campbell, in series one of *The Apprentice*, was also not tipped to win it because he was deemed ‘too nice’. He went on to be the first winner of *The Apprentice* in 2005.

Show leadership qualities

Runner-up Helen Milligan made it to the final and was a favourite to win it, but blew it in the end with a poor business plan. She was on the winning team 10 times and proved to be someone who led people who were more than happy to follow her, because she had good social skills. Each week Lord Sugar asks the team, ‘Good team leader?’ Depending on the team dynamics or the success of the task, candidates nod in the affirmative or shake their heads.

Businessballs.com offers up a definition of a good leader: ‘In the modern age, good leaders are an enabling force, helping people and organisations to perform and develop, which implies that a sophisticated alignment be achieved – of people's needs, and the aims of the organisation. This requires

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attitudes and behaviours which characterise and relate to humanity.' Managing one's emotions and having empathy with what other members of the team are feeling is a key aspect of emotional intelligence and something that Helen, the runner up, was identified as being particularly good at.

Be able to manage or diffuse conflict

Successful candidates on *The Apprentice* know how to respond to conflict – either they dodge it, highlighting their own strengths, or they know how to diffuse it before it becomes an issue. And the latter is, I think, more prevalent with potential finalists in *The Apprentice*.

On the sister show *The Apprentice: You're Fired*, the food entrepreneur Perween Warsi gave candidate Zoe Beresford a piece of feedback when she resorted to sulking and complaining about her fellow team members, 'In business, when you're working with a team, you will have people who are good and who can finish tasks and you will have others who don't. You will have to learn how to manage difficult people differently. Some people you coach, and some you mentor and they will need different things. But you just blow up.'⁴ And blowing up on *The Apprentice* may make for good entertainment, but it is not a recipe for success.

Be self-aware and know yourself

Radio 4's *Thought for the Day* covered 'the surprise win' of Tom Pellereau, observing that he was a man who'd been true to himself and acted with integrity. The speaker commented that some of the other candidates in *The Apprentice* appeared to be conforming to a perceived sense of what they should be or how they should behave, rather than coming from a place of knowing oneself.

In articles following *The Apprentice* final, Pellereau revealed that BBC producers repeatedly tried to ban him from using his black notebook during meetings, fearing he might try and sell it when the filming finished. He refused, arguing that it was essential to his way of working with his dyslexia: 'The way my mind works I need to write things down straight away; I have to get things out of my mind onto the page.' He said he nearly left after the third week. But he stayed true to himself: 'In the end, they let me keep it and ripped out the pages each day.'⁵ Good for him.

And finally, a thought on how *The Apprentice* models good practice in business. For this I turn to the still relative newcomer Karren Brady, who has become one of Lord Sugar's trusted business aides

and, on the show, a fellow 'judge'. If she ever finds herself with nothing to do, she could run a master class in how to give constructive feedback. Known as 'the first woman of football' and Vice Chair of West Ham United FC, I think she brings a welcome perspective to the programme alongside the more dour PR impressario, Nick Hower. She is perceptive in her reflections on the candidates' behaviour and how they conduct themselves. And she gives them clear and specific feedback in such a way that the individual appears to really hear it, take it on board and respect her opinion. It's the positive, negative, positive sandwich.

To conclude, it's often commented that previous winners of *The Apprentice* may find working with Lord Sugar to be a dream that turns into, well, rather short-term employment. It's reported that only one of the previous six winners has stayed working with Lord Sugar, which may be a characteristic of the ambitious or suggest that loyalty may not be a characteristic that Lord Sugar inspires. And maybe it's not that relevant anyway.

This year's series is over. Previous winners are yesterday's news. And now all we have to do is sit and wait for the new candidates to walk into the boardroom and for the whole process to start again next year. We do know that an eighth series has been commissioned though there's a sense, I detect, that viewers (not just this viewer) are tiring of the format.

Personally, I'd be making a plea for some of the messages about the importance of emotional intelligence in business and the power of team working to be made much more explicit. When growth is slow, when there's economic instability, high unemployment and job insecurity, we need programming that challenges the clichés of horrible bosses and bullying cultures as the norm at work.

Call me a dreamer but perhaps this, too, could make for really interesting TV? ■

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