

## Getting to the top

I recently met with Simon Cooper, deputy chairman and chief executive officer of HSBC's Middle East & North Africa operations to discuss leadership development. Cooper leads the largest international bank in the Middle East and North Africa, which employs approximately 12,000 people. Cooper is a board member of HSBC Bank Middle East (deputy chairman), HSBC Bank Egypt S.A.E. (deputy chairman), and The Saudi British Bank. Prior to his appointment in the Middle East, he was president and CEO of HSBC Korea. He has over 22 years of banking experience and is a graduate of the University of Cambridge, holds an MA in Law and is an alumni of Columbia Business School. He kindly agreed to share his experience, thoughts and insights in his relation to his road to the top.

**Shane Phillips:** What were you like in school? Did you get good grades and take on leadership roles early on?

**Simon:** *It is interesting: If I look back, I had reasonably good grades but certainly didn't work hard enough. I am much better at managing my day now than I was when I was a student, probably because my day starts six hours earlier than it did then. I keep trying to explain to my children the need to study harder.*

*I played a lot of rugby in school – in some teams I was captain and in others not. I don't believe there is such a thing as a born leader but I was lucky enough to get exposure to many different teams and players and see differing styles of leadership and learn from that exposure.*

**Shane:** Do you think it is important to get leadership exposure early on in life? What was your first corporate leadership role and how did you cope with it?

**Simon:** *I don't think exposure to leadership matters from a development perspective. What is more important to me is people's*



Simon Cooper, CEO of HSBC Middle East.

### ***I don't think there is such a thing as a born leader***

*ability to observe others and see what works and what doesn't and then apply that in their own fields of expertise.*

*I think my first real corporate leadership role was when I became deputy CEO of HSBC's business in Thailand.*

*Prior to that I was an investment banker and, while I led teams, they were typically small and comprised professionals and advisers. The business in Thailand ranged from clerical staff to experts in global markets.*

*I was fortunate to have colleagues who showed me the ropes and who were not afraid to tell me when I was doing things wrong. They also taught me the importance of finding out what the junior members of staff think and feel and of reaching out directly to them. That is something I try and do today. I enjoy hearing their points of view and always learn something about the business and what we can do better.*

**Shane:** When did your personal vision start to take shape?

**Simon:** *A very senior colleague at HSBC*

*once told me that there is no such thing as a career path, there are a series of opportunities and it is how you react to those opportunities that defines whether or not you succeed. He couldn't be more right in my opinion. It is whether you are prepared to take personal risk in terms of taking jobs outside your comfort zone that allows development and broadening of leadership skills.*

**Shane:** Who has been the biggest influencer in terms of your professional development. Did you have a mentor?

**Simon:** *I have been fortunate to have had exposure to many excellent bankers in my time at HSBC and have learned from all of them. I have had various mentors since I joined the bank. In fact I probably owe my career to my very first mentor who convinced me, after six months in the bank, to stick it out and helped me pursue a career in investment banking.*

*I am a mentor to some colleagues around the world and strongly believe in the value of mentoring – as both mentor and mentee. I would encourage anyone who is interested in self development to seek a mentor – but they should be careful to pick one that will speak hard home truths when required – and also seek opportunities to become a mentor. It teaches a lot of self-awareness and also provides a platform to shape the careers of other talented people.*

**Shane:** Do you have any principles or mantras that you hold sacred to your success?

**Simon:** *I would say it's important to surround yourself with the best teams of people you possibly can. I think the ability to put together teams and then encourage them to work together is what ultimately enables businesses to succeed. It is important, I believe, to remember that any organisation must be greater than the individual who runs it. It is important also to ensure that the teams are strong enough to continue beyond any single leader.*

**Shane:** What values do you think are most important for an executive to have? Dr. Pfeffer of Stanford University lists seven: ambition, energy, focus, self knowledge, confidence, empathy with others, capacity to tolerate Conflict, and intelligence. Which values do you subscribe to?

**Simon:** I agree that all of the values mentioned are important. To this list, I would add openness to new perspectives and ideas. One of HSBC's key strengths is the fact that it is a truly global institution. I have conversations with colleagues around the world every day, and this international perspective is very important to making the right decisions.

If I had to single a couple out I think they would be integrity and energy. And, of course, a sense of humour is always important.

**Shane:** Often people say "let it go", "let it be" while on the other hand conflict seems to be the hall mark of the iconic leaders of our time. Where does conflict fit into a leader's competencies?

**Simon:** I believe that it is important

always to strive for improvement and that may at times mean challenging the status quo. I don't, however, agree that this has to always be confrontational.

If we go back to my view that a great leader has a great team around them, then it should be that that team is energised to support the leader in his or her drive to improve things. Challenging the received wisdom and status quo need not be confrontational, and can be liberating and empowering.

**Shane:** Does a leader have to be balanced?

**Simon:** Balanced can mean many things. If you refer to work/life balance then I don't believe it is possible to avoid fairly significant personal sacrifice and hard work, but it is important to devote time to family and friends – just sometimes less than one would wish!

**Shane:** Sir Winston Churchill once said: "The price of greatness is responsibility" – do you think emerging executives focus more on taking on responsibility and let compensation take care of itself?

**Simon:** I would probably have earned

more had I remained as a pure investment banker. My career choices have been driven much more by job satisfaction and the promise of career challenges than by financial reward.

**Shane:** What advice do you have for the up and coming executive?

**Simon:** When opportunities are presented to you, be prepared to take them and always surround yourself with the best people you possibly can.



The HSBC boss is always looking for growth.

